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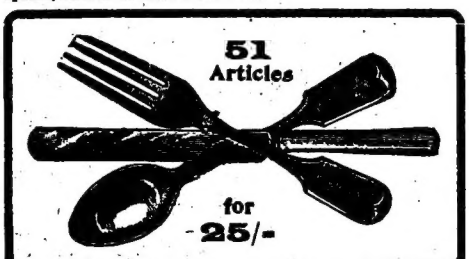

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Short Stories

No. 707.] [One Penny.

For the Week Ending July 19th, 1902.

Murder by Speaking Tube.

A Powerful Narrative in Two Parts, of which this is the first.

By EDWIN S. HOPE.

CHAPTER I.

There was a skeleton in the house of Dr. Featherstone, where old Mrs. Peake, a wealthy old lady who had lost her only child, a son, in the South African War, was staying as a paying guest—not, be it understood, in the character of an invalid. Mrs. Peake was not the skeleton. She was rather the elderly household fairy who, without knowing it, frequently waved the magic wand which kept the skeleton mostly invisible.

Mrs. Featherstone was pretentious and extravagant; that was one part of it, and for another her husband was accustomed to instal a *locum tenens* from time to time without regard to holiday seasons, and hie him to London and elsewhere with a frequency highly detrimental to his dwindling Boscall practice.

The doctor was supposed to be engaged on a great medical work, and the eccentric Mrs. Peake, who seemed to be gradually transferring to him the love she had once lavished on her son, took a fussy but unintelligent interest in his unspecified studies, and petted and coddled him on his brain-weary returns from the excursions referred to. She had, through her cheque book, a part in the furtherance of the great "work" of which she was extremely proud.

Mrs. Featherstone observed this comedy with furtive contempt. She knew that her husband's lapses from regular work were due to distaste for steady exertion and a passion for cards and horse-racing which were relics of more prosperous times. Consequently, she had for his "studies" an attitude of alternate sympathy and reproach, according to whether they temporarily made him or broke him.

One way and another things had now reached a crisis, and Doctor Featherstone had been experiencing a domestic bad quarter of an hour.

"If it were not for that dear old lady upstairs we should have been in a pretty mess before this, my dear," he said. "It was a fortunate day when she insisted on helping me in my researches; and a happy turn that made her cause that help to be periodic. You always get a share of the money, you know, so you have little room to talk."

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Mrs. Featherstone flushed. "It makes me feel horrible, Fred," she said. "It *is* mean of us! It would be nicer for me, you will admit, if you could make the money properly out of an increasing practice such as yours ought to be. And suppose anything happened to this paying guest of ours? If she died? In your position, which they will define, I am sure, as her doctor-in-charge, you have no right to accept such large gifts. I am afraid you could be made to disgorge."

"Don't!" Featherstone winced and flushed.

"You deserve to have the fact put brutally."

"There is no fear, as it happens. I will tell you. Do you know why I show such delicacy about taking her help?—why I say I could not cold-bloodedly take a cheque to the bank and receive her money?—why I declare that if anybody had a hint of the thing I should die of shame?"

"I have not accused you of real delicacy, have I? Why have you gone through all that performance? It has hurt me, Freddie dear, more than the taking of the money."

"I have gone through that performance, woman——"

"How dare you——"

"I have gone through that performance, *woman*," he repeated, and his face took on an ugly blotchy pallor, "because it has always ended in the poor deluded creature drawing the cheque to self, cashing it herself and bringing me the money. She respects my feelings"—a tinge of colour came back to his face—"and never a soul knows but ourselves that the money comes to me at all. Poor Mrs. Peake, she is a bit wearying."

Mrs. Featherstone, mimicking the old lady, smoothed her husband's brow with her jewelled white hand and murmured affectedly, "The dear doctor!—his poor tired brain! I know what these headaches are."

"She's as good as gold, though."

"You certainly find her so."

"And you. I won't have a word said against her," said Featherstone in a sharp outburst of loyalty; "she has been a mother to us both since she came here. *Now*, what have you to say?"

"Only that you make me a little bit sick, Freddie dear."

Featherstone smarted over this for hours. Before the day

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was out, however, he had an unexpected triumph which he felt would restore him somewhat in the esteem of his pretty, extravagant wife. The paltriness of his conduct he knew he could never justify, and he had in him manliness enough to make him shrink in the consciousness of it. But he knew that his wife would overlook much if only the family finances could be placed on a sounder basis.

The event of the day was a respectful summons to the office of Mrs. Peake's solicitors.

The firm, assembled both in an impressive manner, began by congratulating him—one kindly, fat-headed, white-whiskered old gentleman on either side holding a hand and working an arm up and down with a suggestion in the act peculiarly significant of first aid to the drowning.

"It is a bit unusual," began the senior partner pressing him gently into an easy chair, "but the fact is, it is by the wish of our client, Mrs. Peake, that we have asked you to make this call. Her emotions would not allow her to impart a certain—ah—matter to you herself, so we are desired to acquaint you with the fact that she has to-day executed a will in which she leaves you everything."

"Ab-so-lute-ly everything!" said the junior in an unctuous echo. "It is, of course, very unusual——"

"Very," said the senior, "but Mrs. Peake insists upon it, and what can we say? I mean," he added hastily, "unusual to have the one benefitted informed—particularly in such circumstances as these. You are overcome, my dear sir, and no wonder! A glass of wine, perhaps?"

"It is all right now," said Featherstone faintly, and he turned abruptly round in his chair and laid his head on his hand.

Strange to say, his first thought had been—the thought arising from his perfect knowledge of Mrs. Peake's character—"A thousand to one but the old girl, with all her emotion, will want to see me at the earliest possible moment to judge how I have taken the news!" And as he was thinking he caught sight of the dim shape of her towering bonnet bows intercepting some of the light which fell from the corridor windows on the glass panel of the door. The "old girl" was eavesdropping.

"I refuse it!" he exclaimed. "Why, great heavens, Hylton—and you know it, Wilks—if this were known I should be ruined."

"A ruin worth forty odd thousand pounds," said Hylton softly as he eyed him keenly.

"I value my reputation at a higher price than that," said Featherstone hotly.

"You surely don't think I refer to my beggarly Boscall practice, do you? I am working quietly for something wider than that. My book — but, really, gentlemen, this is kind of the dear lady. She has been a mother to me."

"Well, this looks particularly like it, doesn't it?" said Mr. Hylton rubbing his hands and smiling pleasantly. "Wish somebody would be a mother to us, eh, Wilks?"

The old boys chuckled in unison and poured out for each other glasses of port.

"I can't accept it, I can't!" said Featherstone in a tone of anguish suggestive of refusing a dose of cod-liver oil. "There will be nasty talk—undue influence ——"

Mr. Wilks coughed. "I certainly suggest," he said, "that you join us in persuading our client to make her home anywhere but in your house. It would look better. The old lady has not a relation in the world and if she chooses to make you her son by adoption who is to say nay? She has all her wits about her; and as for influence—we can speak about that. We have questioned her most earnestly, and her accounts of your diffidence over accepting a sixpence more than the payments for her board—extremely moderate charges, I must say—show us that you have taken no advantage whatever of her infatu—I beg pardon, her intense regard for you—er—hum—ah—what do you say, Mr. Hylton?"

"From what I can see, you have lost money by her, doctor, up to the present."

"Don't! don't!" said Featherstone, thinking what a brick the old lady had been on this very delicate point. "You can't tell how good she has been to me or you would not say such a thing!"

"The dear, dear fellow!" The soft whisper went up to the grimy ceiling of the glass corridor, the old lady's eyes turned up raptly in the same direction, and several weak tears ran down the pretty old apple-streaked cheeks in the direction opposite, while the upstanding bonnet-bows quivered in every silken length with a most luxuriant emotion.

"Of course," said Mr. Hylton, "we are not going to shout the provisions of our client's will from the housetops, but for your sake, when it comes out afterwards, it would be better for Mrs. Peake to resume housekeeping on her own account."

"Never!" arose the whisper without. "He must drive me like a beggar from his doorstep first—and then I will not alter the terms of my will. The dear, dear, doctor!"

Dr. Featherstone had succeeded in making the best of good impressions on the lawyers before he left their office. If there was a suspicion of over-acting about him, the good old gentlemen did not see it, and sent him away with heaps of fatherly advice.

There was a scene at home with the sentimental old lady, out of which Featherstone came with a half submission to Mrs. Peake's wishes, and a character with her for disinterestedness higher than ever. He had actually persuaded her to leave a few thousand pounds to King Edward's Hospital Fund!

"You fool!" gasped his wife when she heard the news, and her joy in the coming wealth was lost in the tears she shed over the odd thousands thus wilfully thrown away.

"You do not see my great wisdom, dear," said he sweetly, "because you are a little blind."

Six months passed before his "studies" called him again to the metropolis—six months of financial worry, deepening debt, and spasmodic fits of household extravagance. Mrs. Featherstone enjoyed a round of gaieties during the time, and her husband was in continual dread lest a crash should come and lower him in the eyes of Mrs. Peake, who still remained with him, in spite of gentle and even loving remonstrances.

Then, with a gift of fifty pounds from the old lady, a gift not this time shared with his wife, Dr. Featherstone went up to London for a three weeks' stay.

In three days he returned.

"Minnie," he sobbed, putting his arms round the wondering wife in the hall, "it's all over. We are ruined!"

"Come in here," she said, pulling him into the little dispensary, out of danger of being overheard. "Now what is it?"

"Good-bye to our fortune!" he said wildly. "I have seen young Peake, alive—no mistake, Mary Havers with him—alive, I say, and we are ruined!"

CHAPTER II.

Mrs. Featherstone covered her face with her jewelled hands, leant against the wall and wept bitterly, and her husband watched her with reddened, blinking eyes while he beat out the devil's tattoo on the table beside him.

"When will he be here?" faltered the wife at last, wiping her eyes and trying to force a feeling of calmness.

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"I don't know."

"Didn't you speak to him?"

"I hadn't a chance. It was at Earl's Court. They were across the lake, and when I got over the bridge they were gone."

"What!" said she, "have you lost your senses? To decide on a mere glimpse like that! It was not young Peake. Why"—she laughed hysterically—"you had been drinking. Go to your room, dear, and wash those silly tearmarks off your unmanly face. The idea! Upsetting me like that. It was Mary's new lover. She has known him a long time. Flirted with him before young Peake went away, they say."

"It was George Thornton Peake, I tell you!" he said with sullen fury. "I have eyes like a falcon. It was George, thinner and with a moustache, but still—George!"

Mrs. Featherstone had certainly heard rumours that Mary Havers, the pretty, peachy-faced, brunette sweetheart George Peake had left behind him, had found another lover since she had gone from Boscall. She had been seen with him by one of the gossiping natives. Less than a week ago this had happened, though—the other particulars had merely grown on to the original piece of gossip.

Mrs. Featherstone had listened with only a languid interest, and had remembered imperfectly. Mary Havers was no favourite of hers, and she had helped to widen a little breach which had grown between the bereaved sweetheart and mother owing to the former having disparaged the doctor before his fond and foolish worshipper. When she had gone with her people from the neighbourhood she was practically forgotten by the doctor's wife.

Again Featherstone insisted on the recognition—he knew the type of face through all the changes.

"Perhaps," suggested his wife, with a sudden fear of her own, "Mary has spited you by looking up some unknown cousin, who may one day contest—stay; have some tea and try to be easy about it. I will contrive to visit Mary Havers—message of reconciliation from Mrs. Peake or something—and I'll find out all I can. Leave it to me."

Featherstone tried to feel hopeful on just that small point of possibility, but he was heavily dejected, all the same.

His wife contrived to call as suggested, but returned in a very much perplexed state of mind.

"That girl is like a black sphinx!" she said angrily, "I can make nothing of her and her maddening, stony smile. It would not do to press too much, but I feel doubtful now. There is something impending. I am getting alarmed!"

"She may well smile, and she would smile wider if she knew about that very useless document—the will."

"Why useless?"

"Because the old cat will have no use for it when her own kitten comes home. It is George right enough. In spite of the ignorance of the War Office I feel sure of it."

"You want to think the worst," said his wife. "I think it is a cousin, dear, I do, really. It may mean contesting the will, but you must be cautious and make the undue influence harder to prove by any next of kin. Hylton and Wilks believe in you?"

"Yes, for I have already borrowed a couple of hundred on the strength of the 'certainty'!"

"You villain! And not a farthing to me! How have you got rid of it?"

"Mind your own business. There are more serious things to think about now."

That was true. They were their two hearts nearly out brooding over them. Mary now began to cultivate the old lady's friendship again, and journeyed over for a brief visit three days in succession. She seemed surprised at the interest shown in her affairs, and was more sphinxlike than ever.

There was an air of thick gloom over the Featherstones, lightened only now and then by lurid flashes of forced gaiety. Poor, flighty-headed Mrs. Peake did not observe any difference in their manner towards her. Perhaps if she had noticed the gloom she would have put it down to their anxiety concerning her health. This for a time had been low, but it was remarkable that the more healthy she became the more of an invalid she believed herself to be. She grew more flighty, conceited, self-centred and fussy every day, and at times was a great trial to the "dear doctor."

"If she would only die!"

That was an unspoken thought. Featherstone had been sitting with the ladies for half an hour without uttering a word. Mrs. Featherstone, also, was more silent than usual, replying to Mrs. Peake's almost ceaseless chatter with a mere word now and then, while she stole anxious looks at her husband's dull eyes and drawn, dragged face.

"The dear boy!" said the old lady, following the younger lady's glance and observing the worried look of the doctor, "it's those nasty, difficult cases, I know it is. They are dreadfully trying, Minnie, I assure you."

She spoke with an air of imparting knowledge to the doctor's wife.

With a tender expression, but an all too fussy manner, Mrs. Peake crossed over and stroked Featherstone's forehead.

"There, there!" she said.

"Thank you, dear Mrs. Peake, your touch is so soothing," said he in a half whisper; but the look in his melancholy eyes as he turned them furtively and exchanged glances with his wife was full of anger and disgust, and the thought in his wife's mind was that Mrs. Peake looked like a silly hen fussing over a sick lizard.

"I have a lot of difficult cases," admitted Featherstone, "they take much thought; but I ought not to bring my worries into the drawing-room."

"Can I help you?"

"No," he said aloud—"at least, not *yet*." He remembered that she had offered to study up so as to one day help him, and that he had given her a lot of obsolete medical works to fool herself with against the day when he should take up that West End London practice.

"Ah," said Mrs. Peake solemnly, touching her own forehead as if posing for a country photographer, "that reminds me. I meant to give an hour to my books this afternoon—half an hour's reading and half an hour's meditation. Forgive me, Frederick, I know I am too ignorant at present! I am—I will not be contradicted—I am far too ignorant! But wait awhile. Be patient with me, and one day I will astonish you!" The stiff black silk dress swished through the *portière* and she was gone.

"If she could only die!"

The words were not yet spoken, but as the lean-faced little man raised his melancholy eyes to his wife's, some mysterious intercommunication between the two brooding brains awakened the same thought in her head. But Mrs. Featherstone uttered aloud the words which he only formed in his inner soul.

"Minnie!" he said in horrified reproach, but she gave him a glance of defiant recklessness, knowing that he echoed the wish.

His eyes lowered.

"With her money," she said, "you could lift me from Hell to Heaven."

His chin fell lower on his breast.

"She has already given it," pursued the woman, "and it is in a sense ours. It is unfair for it to be taken from us again!"

It must have occurred to her that young Peake, if he truly

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lived, had some rights in the matter. Her husband must have felt so too. Yet they shared the feeling expressed in her words. Even a thief who picks up a fat purse, but has it reclaimed before he can move off with it, has a sense of being defrauded.

Featherstone now spoke openly.

"If she had only died first! In a couple of years or so it would most likely happen in the ordinary way. She is not strong. Without my constant care—you know how I have done my duty, Minnie?—she would not have lasted eighteen months altogether. I have really doubled the last years of her life."

"It is cruel!" she wept. "Why should this fellow turn up now to rob us?"

"You mean," said he desperately, "why has Mrs. Peake lived so long?"

"Only two years to live," she whispered, searching his troubled face with eager eyes—"two years, anyhow. What does it matter? Could you—you are accustomed, every doctor is, to give things to ease, even if it hastens certain death. You know what I mean," she said hurriedly, her eyes groping after a look from his averted face. "It is considered merciful to hasten it in some cases. Many of our ideas about these things are mere conventions—to hasten by minutes is right—by months wrong. I—I should not love you less, Frederick"—she nestled to his shoulder, leaning forward—"it would not make me shrink from you—I swear it solemnly!"

He shrank from her, and shuddered from head to foot.

"Forget what I said," she added quickly, "I am half mad!"

"Never *think* such a thing again," he whispered, kissing her, and the next moment he had left her.

He was passing Mrs. Peake's sitting-room and was arrested by the sound of the old lady's shaky, high-pitched voice. The door was ajar, and he stood at the turn of a corner beyond to listen. Mrs. Peake was boasting to a caller, another elderly lady. Sad to say, she was, in her silly vanity, telling little untruths in an unblushing manner.

"I am quite a doctor myself, Julia, I am really. Perhaps it would be more correct for me to say doctor's assistant. The dear doctor always—or rather, often—asks my opinion in difficult cases. And, do you know, I repeatedly assist him in the dispensary."

"How delightful!" said the other old lady.

A grim smile stole on the face of Featherstone. There was some foundation for the latter boast. To flatter her vanity, the doctor, when, as now and then he did, he made up a bottle of medicine for a patient, would let her imagine she was helping him! It amused him to see her excitement and childish delight when he would say—"Now, dear Mrs. Peake, be very careful, I implore you—fourth bottle on the right—no, not that shelf, but the one above, and fourth from the other side, not that. Bravo! Thank you. I can use it without looking at the label, though a mistake might easily kill one of my poor patients."

Then she would say, "No, no, doctor! Frederick, you must not trust to me too much. Look at the label, I insist!" And he, pointing to the name on the bottle which had taken three shots to find, would say, "You see, I can trust you!"

A beautiful superstructure upreared itself on this small foundation. It was capped, domed, spired, or cupolad with the following boast:

"I am now beginning to make up prescriptions alone!"

This was startling, and a little annoying. It might be damaging. But the listener reflected that Miss Fryar doubtless did not believe a word she was told.

"'*Sul. Quin.*,'" said Mrs. Peake affectedly, "I read that, say, and I know at once, of course, that it means *Sulphate of Quinine*."

"How clever of you. I should never remember!"

"Yes; then, suppose it is '*Io. pot.*'—that's *tincture of iodine*, Julia."

"I should have thought," said the other old lady meekly, "that *Io. pot.*' meant *Iodide*—or *dine*, or something—of *potash*."

"Oh, dear no," said Mrs. Peake irritably, "you are quite mistaken. That has another little mark over it—and then it means *potassium*. 'S-i-u-m,' dear, not 'h.' You see the difference, don't you?"

It cannot be denied that Julia's tone in reply bespoke some measure of doubt, and Mrs. Peake's further remarks sounded flurried.

Featherstone tip-toed away.

Later on Mrs. Peake sought him out in the surgery.

"Will you—oh, will you—do me a great *great* favour?"

"Anything you like to mention," he said recklessly.

"I have been very wicked," she said, wiping a tear from either eye; "I have been boasting and going a little—very little beyond the truth."

"Great Scott!" he thought, "does she think I'm going to be a father to her?"

Her next words showed that this was a very odd penitent. She proposed to cover up the one little sin with another piece of deceit broader and more substantial.

"Show me how to make up a draught for one of my headaches, and let me make it up myself afterwards in the dispensary—without you. Julia is coming to see me again to-morrow afternoon, and she does so greatly admire the outlook from the little dispensary on to the garden. I proposed giving her a cup of tea there if—if—I said to her if I should happen to be in charge during that hour, as I expected to be."

Featherstone looked his surprise.

"Do help me in this," she w nt on pleadingly. "Julia, Miss Fryar, you know, doubts my having assisted you to dispense. I want to convince and astonish her as well as annoy the spiteful, unbelieving—excuse me, doctor, but I saw her smile in a furtive, unpleasant way, and I was so irritated. Do help me, Freddie! It is a very harmless little deception. You could mark the bottles with numbers '1,' '2,' '3,' and so on, so that I need make no mistake. And more than that, you could tell me something about the more dangerous things, so that I could lift a bottle or two down and talk of their effects so as to make her scream—at least, make her flesh creep a little."

"It cannot be thought of," said Featherstone, with professional sternness. He was so truly in earnest—so annoyed at this injurious sort of foolishness—that Mrs. Peake was frightened and began to weep.

A change came over Featherstone's face as he looked contemptuously down on her. Certain words, his own thoughts a while ago, his wife's outspoken utterance, throbbed in his brain—in time to the rhythmic tortures of a swinging headache.

"If she could but die! If she could but die!"

And here was chance making to his hand!

The conclusion of this story appears in next Tuesday's issue.

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THE WHITE WITCH OF HENLEY.

An Up-River Love Story.

"ANOTHER quarter of a mile, Sid, and I'll show you just the loveliest thing to be seen on all the river, from Lechlade to Sunbury!"

"What! at this time of night?" (it was striking ten by Shiplake Church clock) derisively replied Sidney Lane over his shoulder, to his companion.

"Ah! there's the beauty of it!" said the latter, triumphantly, "for it's only when the stars are out, that the Queen of the Night is to be seen in all her glory!—as she really is."

Oh!—then it's a woman?"

"A woman!—why, of course!—what else would so move me to enthusiastic praise?" said Ray Maskell, with the suspicion of a sneer in his tone.

"Faith!—I don't know!" said "stroke" drily, "except it were a new edition of the old creation."

The pair-oar was passing Shiplake as Lane uttered this "cut" at his friend's well-known susceptibility of temperament.

Henley, with its snugly anchored house-boats, came dimly into view round the bend, there being just light enough to see the after-dinner crews amusing themselves on deck, while through Nature's silence sounded the tinkle of mandoline or guitar, the merry ripple of girlish voices, and the untranslateable joyous hum which hangs like a summer cloud over the hereabout boat world at this hour.

"There, Sid!—what do you think of that?" whispered Maskell, as their craft came abreast of an unusually large house-boat, moored, alone, under a canopy of leafy greenness. Sidney Lane held his breath, as he ceased rowing, and saw a vision!

Unmistakeably it was a woman—young—fair, and divinely tall—whose almost unearthly pallor gave point to the name by which she was known among the pleasure-loving boating crowd, "the White Witch of Henley."

She had all the appearance of a statue carved in white marble. Everything about her dress—features—hair—gleamed ghost-like, in the misty half shadows of the summer night.

Not a single light showed on the house-boat, so that this figure—weird in its mysterious whiteness against the background of dark trees—standing, statuesquely still, by the outer rail of the upper deck, startled Lane by reason of its utter unlikeness to anything that he had ever seen.

Old Colonel Sir Harry Vinden, K.C.S.I., was the one up-river mystery, people had as yet failed to solve. He—or rather they never sought the society of those who literally burned to penetrate their secret.

Ray Maskell's solution of the problem seemed to be the most popular, as it was certainly, all things considered, the most feasible.

He imparted it to Sidney Lane as they drifted past the silent, dark water-dwelling.

"Who is she?" he said, in answer to a whispered query of his companion's. "Why—the old Colonel's wife! May and December, you know."

"Unless you know anything definite on that head," replied Lane. "I should say that you are wrong."

"I don't think so," said Ray Maskell, testily, "whenever they indulge in an excursion inland (which isn't often) Esmé Vinden invariably takes the old gentleman's arm; while his attitude toward her has the true matrimonial hall-mark."

"That is no proof!" answered the other. "For my own part, I should be inclined to say that she is the old man's daughter."

"You're wrong, old chap! you're wrong! and this, in spite of the fact that the majority of the men are crazy about her."

"And you—are you, too, one of the victims?"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"I am sure I don't know; only that falling in love with married ladies is just a wee bit—well—bad form, isn't it?"

Sidney Lane, as he bent to his oar again, could not see the evil expression in the other's eyes, so that his thoughts, so strangely stirred by the glimpse he had caught of Esmé Vinden's beautiful, yet death-like face, were undisturbed; while his determination to know more of its fair owner, intensified with every dip of his blade in the rippleless water.

As for Ray Maskell, the implied imputation of bad "form," had viciously sealed his lips.

It was practically two dumb men, therefore, who headed the pair-oar for the boat-house on the left shore.

Lane, who had been staying at Penton Hook, had left there during the afternoon in his friend's boat, for the Henley Regatta week. There was not much in common between the two; Sidney's openness of disposition, and sunny, good-humoured nature, appealing but little to the *blasé* man of the world.

Still, it is just possible that the former would have gone to his rooms at the "Red Lion" and Maskell to his diggings without, in the case of either of them, anything other than a mere hand-cloud, which the next morning would assuredly dissipate—but for a chance remark of Lane's at parting.

"Do you know the Colonel, and—and Lady Vinden?" he asked.

"Well—no!—I don't," was the evidently reluctant reply.

"But you know about them?" persisted Lane.

"I know, as nearly everybody else knows, that both Sir Harry and—and the lady are absolutely social hermits—that he is quite seventy years of age, while she—Esmé Vinden—wife, or what you will, is barely out of her teens, and that to penetrate the mystery surrounding them, nine men—and for that matter, nine women out of ten, would give more than they could probably afford to lose. But why are you so eager for information with regard to them?"

"Oh, I have a fancy for mysteries—especially one such as this, where the central figure is so weirdly, yet so magnetically fair."

"My dear fellow!—I wouldn't follow up this particular history, if I were you—there's nothing in it—nothing!"

"Perhaps not!—but my curiosity is piqued, and since you it was that raised it, you certainly ought not to be the first to discourage any desire on my part for satisfaction."

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"Well—do as you please!" retorted Maskell, with an unpleasant laugh, "but take my advice, and bar the Romeo business—and midnight out-pourings of the soul; for people say—and—rumour does not always lie—that the old knight carries his antipathy to all intruders, to the extent of a belief in firearms as an effectual, if not exactly legal preventive. Good-night!"

* * * * *

In the sitting-room of the *Iris* house-boat, an hour or more after the pair-oar had passed it on the way from Penton Hook, a lady and gentleman sat at a well-appointed supper-table. Although the cabin was well lighted by hanging and bracket crystal lamps, not a ray of light escaped to the outer world, so effectually screened were the windows by means of thick curtains—ventilation, and a free air current obtained through an automatic overhead "punkah."

Erect, alert, and well-preserved to "dandy" point, Sir Harry Vinden looked to have no nonsense about him—was indeed the *beau ideal* of an old soldier.

His companion, a beautiful girl of eighteen or thereabouts, was remarkable, with regard to her features, for an extraordinary lack of colour. This was accentuated by her style of dress which made in loose, yet clinging robe fashion, was of some soft, dead white material.

The first thought of a stranger would, not unnaturally be—"ill-health."

But Esmé Vinden's ringing laugh—her smile—her infectious flow of joyous, almost child-like spirits, gave the lie to this, and proclaimed her to be a splendid example of Nature's handiwork.

"Esmé!" said Sir Harry, as he drew a wine decanter towards him, "it seems that this desire of mine for perfect peace, and rest, after the heat and turmoil of Indian military life, is going to land you and me—you especially—in a very awkward position."

"How, dad?"

"Why, I heard indirectly to-day, that folks take us, you and I, that is, for husband and wife!"

"Well, I always told you, dad, that to isolate yourself in the very heart of a social colony, such as this is, was a mistake, and that it would most surely have unpleasant, or at least, undesirable results."

"But why should the fact of other people's being fools, prevent me from doing as I like?"

"That's all very well in India, dad; but you see it will not work here."

"No, I see it won't. But my dear, what shall we do? Break out in the opposite direction, and invite all Henley and his wife to feast and frolic?"

"No!—I don't think we will do that, for it would entail the presence of a gentleman whom I especially dislike, although we are personally unacquainted."

"That's odd!—do you know his name?"

"Yes. Ptynne discovered it, when she went into Oxford for me yesterday."

"And it is——?"

"Maskell; Ray Maskell. He is most rude."

"In what way?"

"Why, he lets his boat drift past here if he sees me on deck, or at a window, and stares in the most objectionable manner."

"Does he?—then I shall probably have something serious to say to Mr. Ray Maskell, unless he ceases annoying you in this fashion."

"You know how I like to be on deck in the late evening-time?—he has, I suppose, found out this little fad of mine, and for the past three or four evenings, has behaved abominably."

"Has he!—well, it is not far off mid-night now, and the air is lovely. I'll go up with you for a bit, and wait developments. Has this—this gentleman honoured you as yet this evening with his attentions?"

"Not exactly. A couple of hours ago, he passed, with another man, in a pair-oar, and for decency's sake, I suppose, behaved himself."

"Then we may expect another, if a later visit. Brookes! some cushions for my folding chair on deck!"

When the handy man-servant had, under Esmé's directions, placed his master comfortably, the girl leant upon the outer rail, relapsed into silence, and fixed her eyes up-river.

Sidney Lane was one of the best-hearted fellows breathing; one, too, who never "nursed" a wrong done to himself. So it was, therefore, that when, a few paces from the door of the "Red Lion," he overtook his late boat-companion, he persuaded him in to sup with him.

"No!—I won't take any denial! We'll just have a social snack and a pipe, before I turn you out, and turn in."

Ray Maskell would far rather have gone to his own rooms, and talked with himself; but the other was so genially insistent, that he saw no other way out of it, save by a rude refusal.

In free and easy fashion, in their flannels, they discussed their meal, and sat by the open window in Lane's sitting-room, to finish their modest bottle of claret.

"I can't get that girl out of my head," said Lane, after a five minutes awkward silence. "Do you mean to say that nobody knows anything about her?"

"Nobody, and—nothing. Old Sir Harry has been in India, I believe all his military life, and beyond a week in London after his arrival from Calcutta (where, by the way, he saw nobody) this is his first appearance upon the scene."

"I've got an idea that my old governor knew a Vinden in India, but I've been so long in England that I've forgotten."

"Even if it was the same, you would not know the lady, for, as I've said, she is quite young, and could only have married the old chap within the last couple of years, at the very least."

"Ah!—I still hold you to be in error, old man!" said Lane, deliberately—"that girl is no more a wife, than I am a benedict."

"Well, after all, it doesn't matter so very much—she is nothing to you—or—to me."

"No, of course not, how could she be? I don't know her—but there's no saying, I may—I may."

This harping on the one string was evidently having an irritating effect on Ray Maskell, and making him to materialise ideas which, otherwise, he would have let sleep.

"And so may others!—so may I, perhaps!" he blurted out aggressively. "Meanwhile"—lifting his glass above his head—"here's to the lovely mystery of the Upper Thames!—to the "White Witch of Henley'!"

Sidney Lane, who, till the last half dozen words were spoken, was prepared to do honour to the toast, brought his glass down upon the table with such force, that the stem was splintered.

"That," he said hotly, "is surely an insult to the lady. Such a name cannot be applied without offence intended and implied."

"Oh!—as to offence—I meant none!" said Maskell. "I merely—well—gave utterance to a jest."

"Which, on second thoughts, you must agree was ill-timed, if nothing else."

"If you like to have it so—although every man is entitled to his own opinion, isn't he?"

"I suppose so—within limits."

"Come!—don't let us quarrel, Lane, and spoil the good time we hope to have——"

"Quarrel—not I! There's my hand upon it! But I do not feel in the least like going to bed!—I am half inclined to take a midnight spin for an hour—I think I know where my man has stowed my boat."

"Then you're more mad than I gave you credit for being. Good-night!"

* * * * *

It must have been nearly twelve o'clock, when Esmé Vinden suddenly startled her father out of a nap.

"Dad!" she cried. "Dad!—wake up!—there are two single sculls coming down!"

"Hoh—hoh!—this is getting interesting!" said Sir

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Harry, sitting up, and looking in the direction his daughter was pointing.

"See!—the first one is not Mr. Maskell!—I am *sure* it is not! The second one keeps a good distance behind—and in the shadow of the bank. I don't think the first one sees him."

"Number two must be watching number one, then, I should say," remarked the old gentleman.

"Now number one puts on a spurt!" cried Esme, excitedly, "and the other is pulling out into mid-stream!"

By this time, the foremost boat was within snap-shot distance of the *Iris*.

The sculler, who was now clearly conscious of his pursuer's presence, showed no sign of slackening speed, and, though casting an earnest look at the house-boat, would, no doubt, have kept on his course.

But the man in the craft behind had soon, by dint of strenuous exertions, brought the bow of his boat right up till it touched the stern-post of the one in front.

His object was to get the inner or left bank side. This, number one did his utmost to prevent, shouting out to the other to keep clear.

"You rascal!" roared Sir Harry from the deck of the *Iris*—"I'll find out who you are, and have you posted everywhere!"

Then, a shriek from Esme—the overturning of the second boat, and the disappearance of its owner in the water.

"Hi!—Brookes!—scull out the dinghy!—the fellow mustn't drown! Why, the chap he tried to run down has gone in after him!—Good boy!—good boy! He's got him into his own boat! He's sculling to us! Here!—Esmé—go down, and see about some hot flannels, and things!"

In less than ten minutes, Ray Maskell was lying, breathing stertorously, on the couch in the sitting-room of the *Iris*.

It must be confessed that Esmé, womanly and tender though she was to her finger-tips, gave the most of her attention to Sidney Lane's watery condition.

Here was a man, she said to herself, who actually risked his own life to save that of the coward who had done his best to drown him.

"Yes, sir," said Sir Harry, emphatically, and when Lane had duly introduced himself, "I'm proud to know you! and if you were only the same flesh and blood as my old comrade Archie Lane, commanding in Poonah ten years ago, why! I'd be the happiest man in all England."

"Do you mean General Lane, now commanding in Ceylon?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Well, I am his son, if——"

"His son!—Archie's son!—God bless you, my boy!—you've just done what your father would have done!—Esmé!"

But Esmé had gone up on deck again.

"Go up and bring her down, Sidney—why, of course. I remember you know, as a baby—baby Sid, your father used to call you!—go up and bring my Esmé down!"

But it was a longer operation than the patience of the old soldier could stand, so stumping up the companion, he broke in upon their *tête-à-tête*.

He found them—both leaning upon the rail; Sidney pouring into her ear, Othello-wise, some wonderful story, maybe, of adventure by flood or field.

And this was by no means the end of it, for, the spell being once broken, Sidney Lane took good care that, so far, at least, as he was concerned, it should never again haunt the *Iris* or its mistress.

Ray Maskell came to himself before daylight, and getting into his recovered and "righted" boat, pulled away, and was seen no more.

* * * * *

Lane—Vinden.—On September the 5th, at St. George's, Hanover Square, Esmé, only daughter of Colonel Sir Harry Vinden, K.C.S.I., to Sidney, only son and heir of General Sir Archibald Lane, K.C.B., D.S.O.; commanding in Ceylon.

It is *not* curious, that from the night Ray Maskell was saved from drowning by Sidney Lane, the "White Witch" disappeared from Henley, and, to the astonishment of the wiseacres, has never been seen there since.

Ralph Enderby.

Hugging.

A North country paper, to encourage hugging in the locality in which it is published, says: "A Liverpool man, while hugging his girl one evening, received a telegram stating that he had fallen heir to a fortune."

The paper is right in its efforts to stimulate a healthy sentiment in favour of hugging, but it does wrong to hold out such inducements, as it will not be one time in ten thousand that a man, while hugging a girl, will receive such a dispatch.

He will oftener receive a dispatch bound in leather, from the girl's father, which will inform him that he has fallen over a doorstep, and is heir to a lame back.

There should be no money consideration in a case of hugging, and no hope of falling heir to anything. It is fortune enough for a man to have a girl to hug.

Hugging can never become what it should be, our great national recreation and enjoyment, our picnic, as it were, until all thought of outside matter is eliminated from it, and the hugging is simply done, for instance, because there is a good opportunity and no one to say nay.

The difference in hugging can readily be seen by those who have done a little of it themselves, if they go to a theatre and watch the actors and actresses.

It is not once in a hundred times that hugging on the stage is done because both parties like it, but it is always done for money, at so much a week, and wardrobe furnished.

The actor puts his arm round the actress as though he were holding up a sign, and the actress smiles a two-for-a-penny smile and looks as though she was taking pills.

We have often seen a couple of lovers in the audience, who probably know scientific hugging when they see it, look at this stage hugging and curl up their lips with scorn, and look at each other as much as to say:—

"If we were on the stage playing that scene we would give the audience something for their money."

Occasionally a couple of stage lovers unbend themselves, and get in a hug or two that breaks a string; but in those cases one or the other blushes and looks round at the wings to see whether the actor's wife or the actress' husband is looking.

There has got to be a certain amount of fellow-feeling between the hugger and the huggee, or it is a mere matter of form and not worth the price of admission.

Sometimes we think we would like to go on the stage and give some of those actors a few points that would be of great benefit to them in their business; but if we should offer to do so they would probably impute sinister motives to us, and hit us.

It is not that we would care for the hugging, but the advancement of art.

There are some actresses that the best hugger in the world could not hug and feel that he had got the worth of his money, and there are others when an actor would be justified in playing without a salary and boarding himself, just for one hug per evening, and Wednesday and Saturday *matinees*.

D. Huggins.

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A TERRIBLE ERROR.

Which, after Nearly Ruining Three Lives, was Happily Rectified.

"THANK Heaven, that burden has rolled off my shoulders at last!" exclaimed Matthew Wadleigh, as he counted out and rolled together £30 in Bank of England notes. "That," he continued, as he placed an elastic band round the roll, and put it in his breast pocket, "pays the last penny of the mortgage on the little home, and it shall be a birthday surprise for the wife. Dear little Nina," he thought, "how hard she has tried to help me, and now, please God, we can take things a little easier for the rest of our lives," and with a lighter heart than he had possessed for the past five years, he locked his desk, took down his hat, gave it a thoughtful brush, and flecking some dust from his coat, left the office.

So happy was he that the dear little home was at last to be all his own, freed from all incumbrances, that he could not refrain from whistling a merry air as he waited for his 'bus, and all the way home his mind was busy with what Nina would say, and how her face would light up with pleasure when he should show her the money, and tell her that the only cloud which had in any way darkened their five years of wedded life, would at last be lifted, and that henceforth nothing but the bluest and brightest of skies would shine upon her; for Matthew Wadleigh was still very much in love with his wife, in spite of those five years.

"I think I'll wait until to-morrow before I tell her, and then Metcalf will be gone and we shall be by ourselves once more," he said to himself as he ran up the steps of his home.

Metcalf was a friend of his boyhood days, of his youth, and of his manhood; a most eccentric fellow, of a sombre, taciturn disposition, and few liked him, because few knew him well enough to know the finer qualities of the man. There was something repellant in his manner, a something which seemed to surround him in mystery, which none dared for an instant to try to penetrate. Yet, for all this, he and Wadleigh had been drawn together most strangely when they were boys, and as they grew to manhood and Wadleigh never questioned him regarding himself or his family, the friendship had continued, and after Wadleigh had married and had a home of his own, both he and his wife had always made Metcalf most welcome, whenever business or inclination called him in that direction.

Now Metcalf was going away for an indefinite period, and had been making his farewell visit. To-morrow he was to leave, and Wadleigh was not a bit sorry, for the cosy, pleasant evenings that Nina and he spent together could once more be resumed. All this was passing through his mind as he entered the hall, and there he saw a man's hat and overcoat on the rack. For an instant he wondered to whom it could belong, and then saw it was Metcalf's. "Wonder what brought him home so early," he muttered, and then remembering he was to leave early the next morning, continued: "I suppose he came home to pack up." He was about to pass up the stairs in search of Nina, who evidently had not heard him enter, when his attention was arrested by the sound of voices which reached him from the drawing-room. Pausing a moment until he made sure it was his wife's voice he heard, he crossed the hall to the drawing-room door, which was slightly ajar, but across which a curtain was drawn, hiding the inmates from view. His wife was speaking and with no intention of listening, the words he heard held him spellbound. "I never dreamt of this, Herbert!" he heard her say, and then he only caught a word or two—"you can never know—happiness—two people"—— Here Metcalf's voice broke in—"could only persuade you—never regret—life-long—to repay——"

Wadleigh's brain whirled, and for an instant he was powerless to move. What could it mean? He could not even think; but one thought was in his mind, could it be?—here he grasped the back of a chair for support, while an iron ball of a ton's weight seemed to drop into his heart.

A movement behind the curtains, the voices coming nearer, the words: "God bless you, little woman, for the comfort your assurance gives me," brought him to himself. With long strides he noiselessly crossed the hall entered his own "den," and locked the door.

He sank into a chair, and sat there like one in a dream, and as one in a dream hears voices, so the words he had heard sung themselves over and over in his brain.

At length his reason came to his rescue, and, springing to his feet, he shook himself and muttered: "What a fool I am making of myself! What if I can't explain it—Metcalf, my old friend, the last man in the world for me to mistrust, and the last man on earth to make love to anyone! And Nina, my own little Nina, of whom I have never had a suspicion! Yes, I must be a fool!"

He determined to put the whole thing away from him; he would not even ask her about it; he knew she would tell him when she had an opportunity, after Metcalf had gone; and then as he heard her coming towards his room, he rose and opened the door for her.

"Why, Matt," she exclaimed, putting up her lips for his usual kiss, "I didn't hear you when you came; why didn't you call me, dear?" As much as he determined to forget the incident which had so unnerved him, he could not help noticing the flush upon her cheeks, and a little nervousness in her manner. He drew her into the room, and putting his arm around her, lifted her face to his as he answered her, "Yes, dear, I came home a little early, as this is to be Metcalf's last evening with us," and then as he looked long and earnestly into the blue eyes, he asked: "Tell me, darling, will you be sorry when Metcalf is gone?"

She looked at him in surprise for an instant, and then laughingly said: "What a queer question for you to ask me, Matt! I am indeed sorry for the poor fellow, he seems so alone in the world, and always so sad. I am sure he must have had some great trouble in his life, and if he can find any comfort with us, I am always glad to have him come; but you have heard of people who make you twice glad, haven't you? Well, he is one of that kind. I am always glan when he comes, and glad when he goes, for, Matt, dear, you know we can always have much nicer times when we are all by ourselves!" and she nestled up to him in such a purring little confiding way that, as he stroked the shining

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brown head, he despised himself for ever having had a thought of ill regarding her.

In spite of himself, he watched Metcalf a little closely during the evening, and knew that it was not his imagination that Metcalf's unusual cheerfulness was forced, and that at times his mind seemed ill at ease and far away. Long after Nina had retired for the night, the two men sat together over their cigars, and more than once Wadleigh caught his friend looking at him with a most peculiar expression. At length he drew a long sigh, and said: "Well, old boy, we have been friends a long time, and you have always been good to me, have always trusted me, and I want to say to-night that you little know the good you have done me—but—I feel that this is the end"—speaking slowly, and then he continued, his voice filled with emotion: "God only knows how and when we shall meet again—if ever—but I want you to always think as kindly of me as you can, for you who have everything that makes life dear to a man, can never know the desolation of my heart and life!"

While he had been speaking, Wadleigh's face had been growing paler and paler, his lips were dry and colourless, and now he sprang to his feet, his breath coming thick and fast, and exclaimed: "For Heaven's sake, Metcalf, do you know what you are saying? In Heaven's name, what do you mean?"

Metcalf was a little surprised at the undue excitement manifested by his friend, but looking at him intently, while he gently blew the smoke from his mouth, he answered: "Some time you will know, old chum; perhaps sooner than you think. Many a time since I have been here, I have been tempted to open my heart to you—but no, the time will come when you will understand all. Let the mystery, which you have never sought to penetrate, remain. Why, Matt, old boy, don't look like that; here, drink this," and he poured him a glass of wine, "and then we'll change the subject." Wadleigh's brain had grown more and more confused as Metcalf's strange words came to him, and he could only formulate one idea, until at last he found himself trembling in every limb. Metcalf's reference to his condition, and the wine which he eagerly swallowed, brought him to himself, and calmed his nerves somewhat.

He forced a harsh and cheerless laugh as he said: "Your words were enough to give anyone the horrors! What are you going to do, commit murder or suicide? Perhaps it might save trouble all round if you did open your heart to me, and perhaps I could help you!" But, no; Metcalf, seeing in what state Wadleigh's nerves were, led him away from the subject, to talk of other things.

At last Wadleigh was left alone, and then all the suspicions and fears which had so harassed and unnerved him since his return from the office came back to him with renewed force. Again he went over the words he had heard fall from his wife's lips; again the thought of the something odd in the manner of both during the evening, a strained effort it had seemed to him, to act natural, and then the unfathomable mystery of Metcalf's words!—was there a connection in it all—why was he left so alone in the dark, if they did not intend to—! "O, pshaw," he finally exclaimed, "it can't, it can't be that; beside, a man doesn't generally come to a man and tell him so, if he contemplates—robbing him! and that makes me think," he continued, and pushing back his chair, he took the roll of bank notes from his pocket, that he had placed there with such gladness of heart, and crossing the room to a little desk, placed the money in a secret drawer and locked it, thoughtlessly leaving the key in the lock.

The sight of the money, and the remembrance of its mission, served in a measure to divert his mind from the problem he had been trying to solve, and resolving to ask Nina what it all meant, the next day, he turned out the gas and sought his own room.

* * * * *

The next morning it seemed ages to Nina before Metcalf and her husband finally took their departure. As Wadleigh left the house, he turned back to give Nina another kiss, remarking as he did so: "I shall be home earlier to-night, and I have a little surprise for you; be careful of yourself, and now good-bye"; but the next instant, as he turned to join his friend, he saw a glance of understanding pass between the two as Metcalf raised his hat to her.

An hour or so later Nina came down stairs dressed in outdoor things, a small bag in her hand. She called to the servant and told her she need not prepare lunch for her, as she could not tell at what hour she would be home. As she passed the door of the "den," she glanced round the room, and her eye fell upon the keys still hanging in the private drawer where her husband had left them the night before. Of course her woman's curiosity prompted her to unlock and look into the drawer, before she put the keys away for safer keeping, and she gave a cry of delight when she spied the roll of notes. "So this is the surprise he had in store for me," she said to herself as she took the elastic band from the roll and counted the money. "Perhaps he will be the one to be surprised, after all," she continued, as she lovingly fingered the bills, and then her better self whispered to her and told her to place the money where she had found it—but no, she had hesitated too long, the temptation was too great, and taking the roll again from the drawer, locked it, put the keys where they were kept, and left the house.

If she could only have known the bitter misery which was to overwhelm three lives on account of her silence in regard to the errand that sent her forth from her home that morning she would have hesitated long before she had yielded to Metcalf's persuasions.

That was an awful day for Wadleigh. After seeing the train depart which bore Metcalf away, and feeling at the time as though he never wanted to see him again, he turned his steps towards the office. It was in vain he strove to fix his mind on the duties of the day; between him and the piles of papers on his desk floated the fair face of his wife, and when he tried to read the morning's mail, the words all blurred before his eyes, and then formed themselves into the snatches of words Metcalf had uttered. Every time the telephone bell rang, every time a rap sounded on the office door, the perspiration stood upon his forehead in great drops. He was over-shadowed during all the long, troubled day with a foreboding of coming ill, of some calamity which he was sure was to overtake him before many hours. Time and time again he found himself wondering if Nina was all safe at home, and more than once was on the point of sending a messenger to the house, to find that all was well, and then thinking better of it, would try to assure himself that it would be utter nonsense, and that it would only startle Nina. And so the weary hours dragged themselves away, and with the most hysterical haste he prepared to leave the office. It seemed an interminable length of time before the 'bus came along, and when it did come it crawled along so slowly that he jumped out and hailed a cab. In a few minutes his home was reached, but to his dismay it was in darkness. This need have given him no alarm, but the feeling of some horror about to fall upon him, and which had hung over him all day, so increased in intensity that it

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was with the trembling limbs of an old man he ascended the steps. He entered the hall—darkness and silence—no cheery voice called to him, no sound broke the stillness.

He found the way to his own room, and rang the bell. He heard the servant light the lights in the hall, as she came to him, and then, "When did Mrs. Wadleigh go out, Kate, and did she say when she would be home?"

He made no movement, expressed no surprise when she answered: "She left the house about an hour after you did, sir, and told me I need not prepare lunch as she did not know when she would be home. Shall I serve dinner now, sir?"

"No, I want nothing now," he answered, and she went out and left him alone with his misery. The blow had fallen! His fears were realised, his impressions had been correct; Nina was as false-hearted as every other woman that ever lived—they were all alike, not one could be trusted—and Metcalf—his friend—the man who had shared the comforts of his home, had sat at his table and eaten his bread! "O, fool, fool, fool!" he exclaimed, why didn't I understand and kill him before he ever left the house?—and he had just the same as told him—told him what—that he was about to rob him of his all. Was that what he had meant by his mysterious words of the night before?—and he wanted Wadleigh to always think kindly of him! What a smooth villain he was, to be sure, to make such a fool of him! But Nina, he might have saved her—but no, if she preferred such a contemptible thing as Metcalf to himself, why, what could he have done?—but Metcalf? Yes, he understood it all now, and even as Metcalf had said, sooner than he expected. O, if he had only killed the man—but there was yet time. Oh, yes, he would surely kill him sometime. Then he glanced round the room with the eyes of a raving maniac, to find the little note he felt sure Nina had left for him; it would be pinned to a pin-cushion, or perhaps in a corner of the mirror; that was what they always did, and it would read something like this: "I hope you will forgive us, but I have learned to love him better than I do you. I know you will soon forget me, and try to be happy without me." And then he gave forth a laugh that was horrible to hear.

How still the house was, as though death was there.

Hark! a carriage was driving slowly towards the house—perhaps there had been an accident and they were bringing Nina home dead to him. Would to God they were—she would still be his! But no, the carriage had passed the house. As his eyes turned from the window they lingered a moment on the desk. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he rose and tottered to it, and after a moment's feeble work, he unlocked and drew out the private drawer—it was empty, the bank notes were gone! With one long, bitter wail of "Nina, oh, God, a thief beside!" he threw up his hands and fell heavily to the floor.

How long he lay there he never knew, but when at last he opened his eyes, the first faint streaks of a dull, grey morning were creeping in through the windows.

It was with great difficulty that he raised himself and crossed the room. As he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, he gave a startled cry, for the face he saw reflected there, was drawn and shrivelled like that of an old man, and his hair was white as snow!

What did it matter, he said to himself; it was better so. The old life, the old self, was dead, dead, dead, and now the only object in life was to seek out and to slay so foul a thing as Metcalf, and then—oblivion forever.

* * * * *

A year had passed. One evening a stranger entered a hotel in the North of England. He asked for a room, and after signing the register, strolled into the smoking-room, took up a newspaper, and began to read. Soon his attention was called to two men, engaged in earnest conversation, seated not far from him. The one facing him was short and thick-set, while the one whose back was turned was tall and slight of build, had bent shoulders, and a head of snow-white hair.

"That's queer," the stranger said to himself, as their voices became louder, "I would have taken my oath that was Matt Wadleigh's voice, and it looks like his form, only so much older—it can't be him with that white hair!" And he turned to his paper again. But the next instant he heard the stout man exclaim: "I'll tell you what it is Wadleigh——" The stranger waited to hear no more, but hurriedly rose from his seat, and crossing the room laid his hand on the shoulder of the man he had heard called Wadleigh, and said: "Can this be you, indeed, old friend—why—Matt—in Heaven's name, what does this mean?"

At the touch and the first words uttered by Metcalf, for it was him, Wadleigh had sprung to his feet, his face like that of one dead—a cold, cruel glitter in his eyes; his breath was drawn in hard, dry gasps, and his lips and hands twitched convulsively. He shuddered again and again as he shook off the hand upon his shoulder. At last he hissed between his tightly-closed teeth:

"So I have found you at last, you ——! Five minutes more and my work will be done, and you—you will be in perdition, the place you came from, you black-hearted scoundrel!"

His hand stole towards a bulging pocket.

"I have been prepared for you a long time, you see, but before I send you to your doom, you shall tell me what you have done with the woman you——"

"For God's sake, Wadleigh," broke in Metcalf, "you are either insane or else you are under some horrible delusion."

Metcalf's face had also grown white as was the other's, and, as Wadleigh mentioned a woman, a terrible fear of he knew not what came into his heart; but he controlled himself, and, without showing any personal fear, he continued:

"I don't mind your using that weapon on me any time you like, for God knows my life is bitter enough; but if you are going to give me five minutes, let's use it in straightening out this affair. You have suffered enough to kill ten men, I can see that by your looks; but as that God, before whom I am so soon to stand, is my witness, I have had nothing to do with it, so far as I know, and it is only just to me that you should explain yourself!"

The earnestness with which the man spoke, the utter absence of anything like guilt in his eyes, his fearlessness, all served to sooth and calm the excited man. He was still trembling, and he handed his neat little revolver, a weapon he had carried ever since the fatal day, to one of the by-standers, saying: "Take it, lest I kill him before his time." Then turning to Metcalf, he said: "You fooled me once with your smooth-tongued lies, and escaped me, but now you shall tell me the truth, and then—you shall not escape me!" And he ground his teeth and his eyes flashed fire. After a moment of silence, in which the two men stood looking into each other's eyes, Wadleigh continued, while a sob choked his voice: "Tell me what you have done with the woman you stole from my home, and whose soul you will have to answer for."

A look of horror came into Metcalf's eyes, as he stepped nearer to Wadleigh and said: "Matt, I don't know, I can't imagine what you mean, but I have never laid eyes on your wife, have never heard one word from her since that morning, a year ago, when I left your house in your company. I always had the deepest regard for your wife, but there was never anything between us, and this I know, old man, that oxen could not have dragged

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her from your side, with her consent. You were her world, and in that world alone she lived and breathed, and I would stake my life on her honour and faithfulness!"

As Metcalf finished speaking, his words having brought more peace to the aching heart than it had known for a year, Wadleigh suddenly grew faint, and sank into a chair. He lifted up his agonising face, and exclaimed: "Then, God in Heaven help me, what did become of her?"

Little by little, he told Metcalf the whole story, the conversation he had overheard, all his suspicions, and as much of the year's agony as he could put into words. While he was speaking, a great fear began to grow in Metcalf's heart, but of this he said nothing to his friend. He took his watch from his pocket and studied it, and then nervously consulted time-tables, and finally said to Wadleigh: "Will you take the midnight express with me, back to Hampden? I may be able to help you find some trace of your wife; and on the way I will tell you everything, the meaning of that conversation you overheard, and the words I spoke to you that last night we were alone. Come, will you go?" And once again he laid his hand on his friend's shoulder.

So completely exhausted by the reaction of his feelings, so overcome by the words he had heard, and so broken down by the awful anxiety that he hardly could keep his senses, he seemed perfectly willing to do as Metcalf bade him.

After the train rolled out into the black night, Metcalf said: "I won't bother you with any details, Wadleigh, but will make my story short. There were four of us in our family, and none ever lived to reach his fortieth year without being insane. Insanity was born in us, was our inheritance. Two of my brothers died in the asylum, and then my sister, a most beautiful girl, and to whom I was always greatly attached, grew so bad that I knew the time had come when the asylum must be her home. Many and many a time she has begged me never to let her be carried there, but what could I do? Well, she grew worse so fast, and had so completely turned against me, that I knew two things must be done. She must be carried there before I went away, and someone else must go with her, for she would never have gone with me, and so—God forgive me—I asked your wife to go with her. I had made every arrangement, even to engaging the carriage, and she, blessed angel that she was, promised to do for her as she would had she been her own sister. That night she was going to tell it all to you. I was always a selfish fellow, Matt, and I didn't want you to know it, for fear you would not let her go, but if I had ever dreamed that any harm would have come to her, I would have cut off my right hand before I would have asked her. That my sister arrived there safely I know from the authorities of the institution, from whom I have heard every month. Yet there is a chance——"

Here he stopped, as he caught sight of Wadleigh's face; for an instant he could not speak, for he felt the whole burden of that agonised soul roll on to his own heart, and the horror of all that he had in a measure made his friend suffer swept over him. At last he said:

"This is terrible, terrible, Wadleigh, and even now you must feel like killing me; but my whole life shall be given to finding your wife." A sob choked his speech, for then he realised that perhaps she could never be found.

At last the journey was at an end, and they entered the living tomb which held so many to whom life was worse than death.

"Yes," the matron was saying, "Mr. Metcalf's sister was as well as could be expected, and, to tell the truth, did not seem at all insane except on one subject. From the very first she insisted that a great mistake had been made, that she was not Miss Metcalf, but that her name was Wadleigh——"

"Take me to her, take me to her at once," cried Wadleigh, a new light and a new hope springing within him—and then, as the next instant he was gazing once more on that beloved form, he cried again: "God is good, it is my darling wife!"

* * * * *

With all the cuteness of an insane person, Metcalf's sister had made the authorities believe that Mrs. Wadleigh was the real patient and that she had brought her there, and had appeared so sane that she had not been doubted.

Nina soon regained her accustomed health after she was back in the old home, safe in her husband's love. The sister was never heard from again, although they left no stone unturned to find her.

Like the remainder of the family, Metcalf's mind gave way, but fortunately he lived but a short time, and it was Nina's voice that soothed him, and Nina's hand that closed his eyes.

J. P. Wood.

OUR COLOURED COVER FOR NEXT WEEK'S NUMBER.

A pathetic incident in a powerful tale which appears in next Tuesday's "SHORT STORIES."

"EMILY, if William to-day asks you to marry him, you must tell him to speak to me." "Yes, mamma; but if he does not?" "Then tell him I want to speak to him."

"JOHN," exclaimed the nervous woman, "do you think there is a burglar in the house?" "Certainly not. Why, I haven't heard a sound all night." "That's just what alarms me. Any burglar who wasn't foolish would keep perfectly quiet, so as not to excite our suspicions. Indeed, John, I do wish you would get up and look through the house!"

CUSTOMER (who has just purchased a wonderfully cheap set of furniture): "Do you always pack furniture carefully before delivering it?" New Boy: "This kind we do, 'cause the jarring would shake it to pieces."

A GROUP of children had been attentively watching the antics of a dancing bear that looked very much the worse for wear. At the close of the performance one of them presented the owner with a bright new sixpence. "I hope you will get enough," she said, "to buy the bear some new furs. The ones he has on are awful wore out."

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The Temptation of No. 49.

A Thrilling Tale of a Convict's Escape.

"Suppose you sit here, ladies," said the new governor of the prison, drawing chairs near the window, "and you will see the convicts as they file in from the workshops and from outside. It is just leaving-off time. You will see as good a collection of rascals as you can hope to set eyes on anywhere!"

The two elder ladies sank into the proffered seats with languid murmurs of: "How interesting!" The girl who stood on the other side came hesitatingly. The horror of prison life, as she had seen it that afternoon for the first time, filled her with fear and pity, pity even for those who, she knew, were criminals of the worst class. It was a living death, and she was a highly-strung, impressionable girl.

"Come, Edith!" said Captain Burnett, the governor. "This chair will do nicely for you."

Captain Burnett had only been appointed one month, and the appointment was due rather to influence than to any special qualifications for the post; he had distinguished himself in a post of military administration abroad, and this was a kind of retiring situation. He had a good salary instead of retiring on half-pay.

His daughter, Edith, had been living with her aunt, one of the ladies seated near her, since the death of her mother, and the new governor now intended to have her with him. Edith had arrived that morning, with her aunt and uncle, and half a dozen other guests—these latter of the masculine gender—in time for lunch and had done the round of the prison in the afternoon.

"Here they come!" said one of the ladies.

The convicts now filed across the yard to the main building in order to go back to their cells for the night. Edith shuddered at the sight; they were like so many machines, clothed in a uniform with its distinguishing broad arrows, men whose identity was sunk in a number and who were remembered by their crimes.

To an impressionable girl the sight was a saddening one, saddening to an almost incredible extent. She grieved to think that men could fall so low as to render their incarceration a matter of duty. Then there were others who had made one false step, for which they repented bitterly, but who were here to expiate their criminal folly and whose lives would be spoilt for ever by that one wrong act. Her vivid imagination conjured before her mental vision the monotonous round of existence, apart from the world, shut off, entombed, yet so very near it. Always under supervision, their every act controlled by regulations, the same routine day after day. It was too terrible! She stifled a cry by a great effort and slipped from the room unobserved.

She made her way through corridors from this, the official portion of the governor's wing, to the private rooms, and reached the dainty sitting-room panting with haste and excitement. This afternoon's experience had upset her so! She felt that she could never live here; yet her father wished it and—she *might* get accustomed to it! At least, she would not see them every day, although she was sure that she would think of them.

She caught the reflection of her face in a glass opposite her and she started at her own paleness and at the broad arrows that danced before her eyes and seemed to be moving all over her own dress. That mark was the stamp of ownership, and those men were so many chattels belonging to the government, they did not belong to themselves.

She closed her eyes for a minute; when she reopened them she gave a little scream of fear, for she saw the reflection of a convict in the glass. Springing to her feet, she faced about and saw him in the flesh, standing in the doorway. She tottered and fell on the couch in a swoon.

A refreshing coolness on her forehead was her first sensation on regaining consciousness; then she saw a kindly face bending over hers—a clean-shaven, clear-cut face, regular features and keen eyes; a handsome face, it deserved to be called.

"Where is he?" she asked, as she remembered. "How did he come here?"

"I hope you are better now, miss. I will go. I regret that I should have frightened you. I shall get into trouble for dipping that antimacassar in the water, but there was nothing else handy."

The voice was that of a cultured man. She rose to thank him, but the words froze on her lips and her hand dropped. It was the convict himself!

"I am going," he said bitterly, noticing that she shrank from him. "I am a convict, an everyday sinner, a thing of contamination from which all shrink as from a dread disease! You ask why I am in this part of the—prison." He hesitated at the word. "I am one who has behaved himself well and has earned a privilege. Ask the new governor if you wish to know more! I am not a fit person to be near a lady like yourself! Yet, five years ago, I—it was different!"

The bitterness and pathos in his voice moved her. She recognised that she was confronted by one who had held a good, social position. He might be one of those who had made the one false step that ruins a life. How terrible must be this prison life to him! She inwardly reproached herself for having caused him pain by her involuntary sign of aversion and abhorrence, and she approached him with an outstretched hand.

"I am sorry that I hurt your feelings, Mr.——" She stopped and coloured slightly; in her impulsiveness she had forgotten the immediate circumstances.

"I have no name here," he said, the bitterness in his tones becoming more intense. "I am No. 49!"

He stood erect, in spite of the humiliating confession, and she could not help observing how handsome he was. The sort of man who would be a leader of his fellows; she could imagine him as a dashing cavalry officer and a hero. Yet he was a criminal, an everyday sinner, as he himself had said. No! He was more sinned against than sinning!

"I am No. 49," he continued. He spoke in a low voice, more to himself than to her. "I am permitted to do odd jobs in the governor's garden and even in his house, free from the watchful eye of the warder, but only now and then. Captain Burnett and my father were brother officers and he recognised

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me—and stretched a point or two in my favour, for the sake of my dead father and my poor invalided mother!" He faltered as he uttered the last words. "My mother! They told me in the last letter that she might not live to see me released, although that will be only four months. I shall have served five years and a quarter out of seven years and then have a ticket. Mother! I may live to make amends to my sister for what I have brought upon her, but for mother I shall have no chance of doing anything—perhaps I may not have the joy of hearing her say that she forgives me. I know she does, but I want to hear her say it!" Edith could not move or speak; she listened as the man poured out his heart unconsciously.

"The misery of this life," he continued, clenching his hands passionately. "It is sometimes more than I can bear. I——"

"Have you never tried to escape?" interrupted Edith breathlessly.

"Escape?" He came back to his immediate surroundings. "No! I have known two men to try it and I have no wish to share the same fate. How can one escape with these clothes? To run away is to be hunted down, shot at and dragged back. But I must be getting back to my cell! I thank you—Ah! You are like the governor, you must be his daughter. Heaven! That we should meet in this manner when — when our fathers had — had such plans!"

She scarcely realised the full significance of his words, but she laid a detaining arm on his as he turned to leave.

"Could you escape if you had other clothes?" she asked in short, quick accents.

He stared at her.

"I might!" he almost gasped.

He looked into the pitying eyes and prudence fled. He would have a better chance and he would see his mother. Something else seemed to float through his mind, but he could not remember it, something that appeared to have a restraining influence, but was crushed in the fierce desire to escape that now possessed him.

"I can give you other clothes and money," she said hurriedly. She plunged her hand into her pocket, but her purse was not there and she gazed at him curiously, an incipient revulsion of feeling coming over her.

"I have not taken your money!" He drew himself up haughtily. "I am a convict, but I am not a thief!"

Then she looked towards the couch and saw the little purse lying there; she must have dragged it out of her pocket with her handkerchief, when she wiped her damp forehead.

She snatched it up, caught his arm and drew him into the corridor.

"I have wronged you. I will make amends by helping you to escape from this living death. Come!"

She led him to her father's room, where a travelling suit lay on the bed; a new suit, just received from the tailor.

"Dress yourself in that, quick! I will wait outside!"

She shut the door and waited. In an incredibly short space of time he came out, entirely changed; only the closely-cut hair betrayed the convict.

"Come this way," said the girl. Her heart was beating fiercely. "You can pass through the garden and out beyond the boundary. You will pass warders, but you can evade them. Take this cap, which my father has bought for travelling. There! You are quite altered!"

It was a fact. The cap covered the cropped hair and he might have been taken for one of the governor's party. His face wore an expression of grim determination.

"If I am to get away, I must have your assistance, Miss Burnett. You must walk with me and chat, so as to draw attention from my features."

She hesitated a moment, but her scruples vanished as she saw the set cast of his countenance. Picking up her parasol, she walked by his side into the open.

"The sun is warm still," he said with the ease of manner that betokens the man of society. "Allow me to open your sunshade."

They were coming into full view of anyone who might be about. He opened the sunshade, carrying it with ease and in such a manner as to shield her and hide his own face.

"I wonder if I shall see you again after I'm free," he presently remarked, "then I shall feel that the light has not altogether gone out."

The girl remained silent. Her pretty face showed her terrible anxiety lest the warders should find out before her companion had left the prison.

No. 49 noticed this and begged her to talk so that the warders they were now approaching should have no ground for suspicion.

She rose to thank him, but the words froze on her lips. It was the convict himself.

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For some moments therefore they kept up a forced conversation; she a little tremulously, and he in a disguised voice, yet with perfect ease and coolness; for they were passing men who were employed in the prison and a false move would be fatal. Several eyes were upon them, but he manipulated the sunshade with great dexterity. His absence he thought, would not be noticed for a while, as he was supposed to be doing odd jobs in the governor's house, but if a warder set eyes on his face, the game was up.

They strolled with apparent calmness through the grounds and out through a gate reserved for the use of the governor. There was no guardian at this little gate, for the governor's residence was really outside the prison wall, the end of the official and residential buildings abutting on the prison wall, and only the upper apartments having windows in that end. It was at one of those upper windows that the governor and his party had watched the procession of convicts.

"There are armed warders still on the look-out," said No. 49, bending towards her and speaking softly. "We must still keep up the fiction. If you do not move your head and look up at me, I may yet lose my chance of escape."

He held the sunshade at the back now, jauntily and as a man would who had nothing to worry about. All the time his restless eyes were seeking an enemy and his heart was beating hard.

Edith racked her brains for subjects to talk about and succeeded in conducting a spirited conversation to the no little admiration of No. 49.

"That's right!" he said approvingly. "We never know who may be near us in this road, so we must chat gaily, especially just there, for it passes some of the prison buildings—near enough to be awkward if anyone is there. Tool houses or something of the kind, I believe. Yes," he continued, raising his voice to the ordinary level, and skilfully directing the sunshade to the dangerous side, "there is not a great chance for prisoners to escape from here." Then for a moment the convict was silent.

"I took her for a romantic girl who would be impressed with all heroism in the abstract," he was thinking, "yet incapable of doing anything brave herself, but there are not many girls who would have dared to do what she is now accomplishing." And he gazed on her with wondering gratitude.

The armed warder was on the look-out in the wall tower and his rifle could not reach them yet. In the tool houses, as No. 49 believed them to be, there were signs of life that told them they were not out of danger.

He chatted volubly and gaily, keeping the sunshade between the danger point and his own face, yet continually moving it, twirling it about and protecting her from the rays of the evening sun. He drew in long breaths of the sweet air and his heart was glad with the hope of liberty.

Edith felt a chill at her heart; she feared that No. 49 might yet be caught and she tried to imitate his lively manner lest someone should see them at a bend of the road and her white countenance might "give it all away," as he said.

The danger point was passed, the armed guard was out of sight, and they were approaching the cross roads where he must leave her. It would be unwise for her to go farther, and he was safe so far. He could get away to the cover of the woods, in which he would lie till night was covering everything with a dark pall, and then, in the moonless gloom, he could walk some miles in order to reach a certain spot at which he could take the train, without fear, to London and thence to his home. Not all at once, though, for the detectives would be watching; he must arrange some plan, his mother might be able to travel, so that they could meet elsewhere. He did not know yet what he should do.

"Here we part," he said, a trifle sadly.

They had reached the cross roads, and he handed her the parasol as he spoke.

"You will want money. Take this!"

She held out the purse. He did not hesitate to accept it.

"Yes. I expect I shall need it, but I will repay you one day. I will, however, beg you to let me keep the purse as a souvenir."

She flushed, and then she asked him the question that had been hanging on her lips. She remembered his remark about an everyday sinner, but that might have been in mere bitterness of spirit.

"Were you—were you really—guilty?" And the voice trembled which had remained firm while there was danger.

The handsome man who stood before her—surely he could not have been guilty of a sordid crime? He must have been the victim of a miscarriage of justice, an innocent man wrongly convicted! He read the thought in her appealing glance; for once in his life he became a coward and flinched before her honest gaze.

"Don't make a hero of me!" he laughed harshly. "I am not worthy to stand by your side; I was guilty of a crime which I committed deliberately. I said just now that I was not a thief, but the world would say differently perhaps. But what matters it? I have my liberty, I shall see my mother and obtain her forgiveness and the remembrance of you will keep me in the right path for the future—if I make good my escape. Good-bye!"

He seized her hand and raised it to his lips; then strode down one of the cross roads and was lost to view, never once turning to see the arms outstretched in appealing gesture.

As she neared the prison she came upon a party of warders headed by her father.

"I am glad you are safe!" he said with evident relief. "A convict has escaped, dressed in my new suit. One of the men says he saw you walking with a gentleman; is that right?"

"Yes, father. I walked with him along the road."

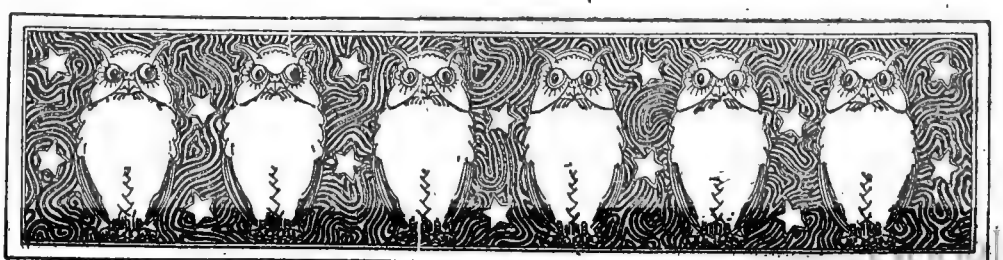
"Good Heavens! Then he even deceived you into taking him for a visitor. Hurry, my men!"

"It was very imprudent, Edith," said her father, more severely than usual. "You should not have sauntered off with a visitor, however certain you might have been that he was a guest. Let us walk back. How did you meet him? That fellow was the son of an old chum, and I extended him a privilege which may get me into trouble. I accepted his word of honour that he would not try to get away if I gave him more freedom and I thought that there was still enough of the old blood in him to keep his parole. He has broken his word! Whatever made him do that?"

There was a pause, and the girl stood before her father and looked at him with shame writ large on her countenance.

"He was tempted, father!"

G. E. Lingen.



THE CONFESSIONS OF CYNTHIA.

Revelations in High Life by a Lady's Companion.

The writer of this series of true stories acted for many years in the capacity of lady's companion to a Society adventuress who lived by robbing her unsuspecting guests. Names have, for obvious reasons, been altered, but the facts are correct.

THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS:

Mrs. NORTON	An adventuress who makes her money by robbing her friends.
CYNTHIA	Her cousin and companion who, when the events related below took place, was quite unsuspicious of Mrs. Norton's guilt.
FLUFFY	An accomplice of Mrs. Norton's.
LORD KINROSS . .	One of Mrs. Norton's most devoted admirers.
SIR JOHN STRICKLAND	A poor baronet who is deeply in love with Mrs. Norton.
MARY VERNON . . .	At one time engaged to be married to Lord Kinross.
HIRAM PETTIGREW .	An American millionaire.
PERCIVAL HOPE . . .	Pettigrew's secretary.

Mrs. Norton: Adventuress.

Cynthia: Her companion

PERCIVAL HOPE HAS MANY CLUES.

FOR THE BENEFIT OF NEW READERS.

CYNTHIA tells in the opening chapter of her arrival at her cousin's in the capacity of companion, and of her discovery that Mrs. Norton is taking part in midnight card games, at which large sums of money are being lost and won. The climax is reached one night when Mary Vernon stakes her diamond ear-rings (a gift from Lord Kinross) and one of the onlookers finds them to be paste. Mary Vernon declares that they are exactly as given to her by Lord Kinross, whereupon Kinross breaks off the engagement. The diamonds subsequently appear as a gift from Fluffy to Mrs. Norton, set in a pair of hat-pins. A few weeks later the notorious Mrs. Norton, with Fluffy's help, succeeds in stealing a pocket-book, containing about eight thousand pounds in paper money, from Hiram Pettigrew at the Café Regal, by substituting for the millionaire's pocket-book one exactly like it. Later on Cynthia discovers the original pocket-book, empty of course, in one of her boxes. Not knowing what to do, she confides in Fluffy, who is very kind, but makes her promise to say nothing at all to anyone else on the subject. He takes charge of the duplicate pocket-book. Mrs. Norton now moves into her new house in Pont Street, and it is while here that Sir John Strickland, a poor baronet, proposes to her. She refuses, but hints to him that if he will consent to allow his name to appear on the directorate of certain companies he will be bound to make money, and then her answer might be different. Mrs. Norton is next presented at Court by her friend, Lady Gaveston. For this function she wears some superb diamonds which have been lent her by Lord Kinross. The Society papers declare her to be the most beautiful and best-dressed woman at the presentation. The same evening Lord Kinross calls at Pont Street for a private interview, and it is during this interview that Percival Hope enters the room unannounced, and makes the startling statement that Mary Vernon has discovered the thief who stole her diamonds.

THERE was a short tense silence. Lord Kinross made no attempt to assist my cousin, but stood quite still, staring over her head with a queer expression in his eyes. Percival watched them both, a sneer on his lips. Frankie had broken down completely, and her loss of self-control at such a moment gave matters a very ugly look. It was as though this sudden indisposition, was connected with Percival's announcement that Mary had discovered the thief who stole her diamonds. The next minute the aspect of the affair had changed; with an effort my cousin pulled herself together, and moved away from Kinross. Her face was working, and she had trouble to control her voice; still it was fairly steady, and her eyes were eloquent.

"I am very glad for Mary's sake," she said to Percival, "I know what the discovery means to her, and I can't grudge Mary any happiness. But—but—Oh Hartland," she turned and grasped his arm convulsively, "you will go back to her; I cannot bear it!"

Lord Kinross caught his breath, he seemed bewildered, and looked glad and sorry both at once. As for me, I felt very grieved for Frankie. She must be terribly fond of Kinross to have been so upset at the mere thought of losing him. And yet, at one time I thought she really cared for poor Sir John.

"Dearest," stammered his lordship, "dear"—Then catching at his self-command. "Nothing can change the feeling that I have for you," he said. "Come, sit down; you quite frightened us."

He placed her gently in a chair, and stooping kissed her hand. It was prettily done—Kinross was always graceful, but I think my cousin would have preferred him to have been more definite about his feelings.

"And now, Mr. Hope," she said a few minutes later, "tell us all about this great discovery."

Percival bowed. Frankie's appeal to Kinross had not touched him, he looked if anything more stern than before.

"You were going to disclose the name of the thief, you know, when—" she paused, "I made a fool of myself, didn't I?" She smiled at Kinross who returned the greeting.

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"CONFESSIONS OF CYNTHIA."
New Series of Stories.

"Now, Mr. Hope, out with it! Who is the guilty wretch?"

But Percival was not to be flustered.

"You must let me tell the tale in my own way, Mrs. Norton," he said quietly, "I'm a slow person, you know, old-fashioned and all that sort of thing."

Frankie shrugged her shoulders and waited.

"On the night of the card party at The Moat, Miss Vernon was unable to offer any explanation or suggestion as to how the diamonds in her earrings had been replaced by paste."

"Quite so," murmured Frankie.

"In the agitation of the moment she forgot that the ear-rings had been out of her possession for some two or three days."

Lord Kinross bent forward eagerly. "How long before that evening?" he asked.

"Some ten days previous to the card party," answered Percival. "The fastening of the earrings had got twisted and consequently it was painful to wear them. Miss Vernon sent the earrings to Howlet, the jeweller at Marlestone, the nearest town to The Moat, to be repaired."

"I know Howlet's quite well," said Kinross, "most respectable firm. It's not thinkable that they should have tampered with the jewels."

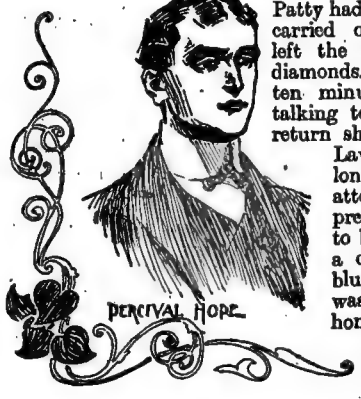
"It is not suggested that they did," replied Percival coldly. "Miss Vernon intended calling for the earrings herself but was prevented. She sent her maid for them instead, some three days later."

"Well?" Frankie leant forward, her eyes alight with excitement, "and did she——"

"You go too quickly, Mrs. Norton. Have a little patience. Patty Fraser, Miss Vernon's maid, is a bright, clever girl," resumed Percival, "but inclined at times to be giddy. She is however attached to her mistress as the sequel will show. Patty has noticed the change that worry and anxiety concerning the diamonds has brought about in Miss Vernon. In the hope that she might relieve that anxiety, the girl made the following statement."

"Tell us quickly," cried Frankie, "quickly.!"

"Patty Fraser confessed that instead of obeying orders and returning immediately to The Moat with the earrings, she stayed at Marlestone some two or three hours after leaving Howlet's. It appears that the girl met a man of the name of Lawrence, whose acquaintance she had made some few weeks previously. He induced her to go for a walk, and finally took her to tea at the Crown Inn where he was staying. They had their refreshment in the coffee room, where Lawrence met a couple of friends. The three men appeared to have pumped the girl pretty thoroughly. They learnt from her the nature of her errand to Marlestone, and with a little coaxing and some flattery induced her to let them have a look at the earrings. Lawrence was enthusiastic concerning their beauty, and declared he must show them to a friend of his connected with the trade, who was at that moment waiting for him in the bar of the inn. Before Patty had time to protest he had carried out his intention and left the coffee room with the diamonds. He was absent some ten minutes, Patty meanwhile talking to his friends. On his return she noticed a change in Lawrence; he was no longer pressing in his attentions, but seemed preoccupied and anxious to bring their meeting to a close. At length he bluntly suggested that it was time for her to go home. The girl thought his last remark a strange one.



"'Tis late,' he said, 'and diamonds are queer things. You never know what may happen to 'em. Take my advice and set off, my girl!' They parted at the door of the inn—Patty has not seen nor heard from him since."

"It is impossible to believe that Lawrence substituted paste for diamonds in that short space of time," said Lord Kinross, "where could he have got the dummies from? The cleverest rogue cannot counterfeit jewels he has never seen, and Lawrence, it is evident, saw the trinkets for the first time that afternoon. Don't you agree with me, Mrs. Norton?"

Frankie looked steadily at Percival. "Mr. Hope has not told us all," she said slowly.

Percival flushed and seemed for a moment strangely disconcerted. "The diamonds were not changed that afternoon," he said at last, "there is proof as to that. Patty, suspicious of Lawrence's manner, returned to Howlet's and begged that some one might be sent with her to The Moat, the road being lonely. One of the shop assistants was told off to take charge of the girl and the diamonds. Howlet had the earrings in his hand before Patty and her escort departed. That the stones were genuine he is prepared to swear. Lawrence had not tampered with the jewels. But—" Percival paused, "he had photographed them."

"For what possible object?" asked Kinross.

"Failing the gems themselves, a photograph is the next best thing to copy," answered Percival, "Lawrence handed over the plate to a clever craftsman, who produced in paste the facsimile of Miss Vernon's diamonds."

"Even supposing you are right, how did the paste find its way to The Moat?"

Percival rose.

"That," he said deliberately, "is what I want Mrs. Norton to explain." He looked at Frankie quite steadily as if he expected her to give some sign of surprise. My cousin smiled at him sweetly.

"My dear man," she said, "how can I? I'm not a detective."

It was easy to see her answer surprised and a little disconcerted Percival. He recovered himself quickly.

"You can give me very valuable assistance in the matter," he said earnestly.

"I will do anything in my power," she answered, "but I'm a fearful duffer at finding out things. People see through me directly."

Percival did not challenge the assertion.

"Patty Fraser says it was through Ella Martin she became acquainted with Lawrence," he continued. "Ella Martin is Mrs. Norton's maid. I want you," he turned abruptly to Frankie, "to tell me when your maid last saw Richard Lawrence."

For a moment my cousin seemed about to lose her temper, then with a smile she leant back in her chair, fanning herself slowly.

"I can't tell you," she answered languidly, "I'm not in the habit of inspecting my servants' visiting list."

"Then the girl herself must be questioned," said Percival.

"I will do so," replied Frankie.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Norton, but I must beg you to do nothing of the kind. It is important not to rouse Ella Martin's suspicions. Your inquiries would inevitably put her on the *qui vive*. You have just told us, you know, how entirely transparent you are; Ella, to quote your words, would see through you directly. You understand," he turned to Kinross, "we suspect collusion between Lawrence and the maid."

"I don't quite see how."

Percival took a deep breath.

"The case lies in a nutshell. We know that Lawrence photographed the diamonds, and we conclude that one of his confederates copied them in paste. We have now to discover how the paste found its way into The Moat. I suggest through the hands" he paused, "of Mrs. Norton's maid."

"And then?" said Kinross.

"At present that is as far as I can get. The next link in the chain will be, I fancy, furnished by Ella Martin herself."

"How interesting!" said Frankie, "you're so clever, Mr.

Hope. I long to hear your cross-examining the poor thing. Dearie," she turned to me, "tell Ella that I want her, or better still ring the bell. I can't have my little Cynthia suspected of collusion with the wicked Ella.

"Now, Mr. Hope," said Frankie when her maid appeared, "this is Ella Martin—ask her what questions you wish. You had better sit down," she added, turning to the girl, "Mr. Hope may keep you some time, and you look tired." Frankie smiled sympathetically and pointed to a chair. Martin, a thin-featured, sensitive young woman flushed gratefully and took the seat; no one could be more charming than my cousin when she chose—a tone of the voice, a look in the eyes—she hypnotised women as easily as men when she cared to take the trouble.

"You are, I think, a friend of a young man named Richard Lawrence?" commenced Percival abruptly.

The girl glanced timidly at Frankie, then in a low voice replied: "He is my brother, sir."

Hope stared at the answer. Frankie smiled.

"An assumed name, I suppose?" said Percival sharply.

"Professional, sir. My brother is a photographer. He thought 'Martin' sounded rather common."

"And pray, what does he photograph?"

For the first time Ella hesitated.

"All sorts of things," she said at last, "people, and places, and——"

"Diamonds?" suggested her cross-examiner.

"He may," said Ella suddenly.

"Now, my girl, this won't do. You're not telling me all you know. Believe me, the best thing for both your brother and yourself is to speak the truth without any reservations. Now, answer me, why did your brother wish to photograph Miss Vernon's diamonds?"

Still the girl hesitated, glancing round at Frankie as if for inspiration.

"Come, Ella," said my cousin, "answer Mr. Hope. I'm sure your brother has done nothing wrong."

"Thank you, ma'am," said the girl. Then turning to Percival, "Richard had an order from a paper, sir, to photograph the jewels of society ladies—Miss Vernon was particularly mentioned. Richard wrote and asked her permission some time back, but she refused. He asked me if I could help, so I introduced him to Patty Fraser and——" Ella paused.

"And Richard met Patty, took her to tea, borrowed the diamonds and photographed 'em—isn't that it?"

"Yes sir—he didn't hurt the earrings, sir."

Percival nodded.

"I'm aware of that. How many copies of the photo did he print, do you know?"

"I can't say, sir. He sent one to the paper I told you of, and one——" she stopped, in evident confusion.

"And he gave one to you, eh?" said Percival.

There was no answer.

"Did he send you a copy?" demanded Percival again. "If you won't answer, I must go to your brother, that's all."

The threat was effectual.

"Yes, he did send me one," she murmured.

"Where is it?"

"I—I—" the girl seemed positively unable to speak, she was trembling and quite pale, her eyes fixed beseechingly on Frankie. This time however my cousin did not come to Ella's assistance but continued to fan herself unmoved.

"I don't know, sir," the girl said in a faint voice, "I can't tell you at all. It disappeared one day from my box, I haven't seen it since."

"You say it disappeared. When?—After you came to town?"

"No, at Lady Winchin's, sir. Richard sent me the photograph a day or two after he met Patty. I missed it shortly before—" she glanced apologetically at Lord Kinross.

"Before Miss Vernon left The Moat, is that when you mean?"

"Yes, sir, about four days."

"Did anyone in The Moat see the photograph besides yourself?"

Ella caught her breath. We waited anxiously for her answer—the answer that surely would supply the link that Percival was seeking.

"Come," said he, "did you show it to the other servants?"

"No, none of the servants."

"Well, to any of Lady Winchin's guests?"

The girl was obviously distressed. She trembled and half rose in her chair. For a second her eyes sought Frankie's but my cousin did not look towards her.

"Well?" said Percival once more.

Ella Martin sank back in her chair.

"No," she said quietly but firmly, "nobody saw the photograph but me."

Percival started to his feet.

"I don't believe you!" he cried. "You're not telling me the truth!"

"You've no right to say that, sir," said Ella. "I have answered all your questions. Here is my brother's address if you want to know anything more." She handed him a paper, and stood with tight lips and downcast eyes before my cousin.

"Have you finished with me, ma'am?" she asked.

Frankie lowered her fan.

"I think so," she answered, "you've nothing more to say to Ella, Mr. Hope?"

"Nothing—to Ella, Mrs. Norton."

Frankie nodded.

"You may go," she said, "and you needn't wait up for me to-night, Ella."

The door closed softly behind the maid. For a few minutes nobody spoke.

"You're disappointed, Mr. Hope," said Frankie at last. "It's a dead lock, isn't it?"

Percival looked dogged.

"The girl wasn't speaking the truth," he said.

"In what particular?" asked Frankie.

"I believe she showed the photograph to somebody, who subsequently stole it. I feel sure Ella Martin knows who it was, though for some reason she pretends not to."

"The thief then, in your opinion, stole the photograph with the intention of getting the diamonds copied in paste?"

"Exactly."

"Take care, take care," cried Frankie. "Don't you see what you're doing? You are casting suspicion on the woman you are trying to prove innocent. Don't you see," she came quite close to Percival and spoke eagerly in quick low tones—"there's only one person to whom the photograph would prove of any use, only one person who would benefit by changing the diamonds for paste. In accusing Ella Martin of untruth you cast suspicion upon Mary, and that"—with an eloquent gesture of her hands—"that is unbearable! No matter what evidence you brought me, what proofs you gave me, I should declare Mary was innocent. But you cannot look for the same judgment from others. Therefore, for her sake, I warn you—take care!"

"You are too good, Mrs. Norton," said Percival, "and too sympathetic."

"Not in Mary's case—do you think so?" she asked innocently.

"I think," he said with a quiet smile, "that you are a very clever woman."

"It is seldom indeed you stoop to flattery, Mr. Hope. Will

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you excuse me"—she glanced from Percival to Kinross—"if I leave you for a little while; I want to write a note to Mary."

Frankie touched me as she passed, and taking it as a signal, I rose and followed her. The room was a large one; Frankie went towards the farther door.

"Don't trouble, please," she said as Kinross flew to open it, "I want to speak to Cynthia a minute." She turned as she spoke and began to scold about the arrangement of my hair.

"You look so bad," she said, "and you have not fastened the lace on your bodice properly. I'll do it for you. Don't be silly, child, they can't see," and she drew me behind a large Japanese screen, standing before the door. Frankie was a little rough in her manipulations. She caught hold of the lace, jerking the string of pearls about my neck.

"You've broken the cord," I cried, "what shall I do?" and I stared dismally at the beads scattered on the floor.

"Pick them up," said Frankie, "and take care you find them all, I value those pearls." She went out, closing the door behind her. My eyes filled with tears. It was very mortifying to be treated like a child. To my comfort however the incident appeared to have been unnoticed by Percival and Kinross, at any rate they made no offer of assistance. I gathered up the pearls nearest at hand, and sitting on the floor commenced to thread them.

"Percival," remarked his lordship, "what bogey are you hunting? Your enthusiasm is not entirely on Mary's account."

"My first object is to prove Mary innocent."

"And then?"

"We'd better leave it at that, I think, unless—" he paused. "Tell me, Hartland, are matters serious between you and Mrs. Norton?"

"Do you ask that on Mary's behalf?"

"No, on yours."

"You are hardly complimentary to Mrs. Norton. As for me——"

"Don't sneer, Hartland—you must know I only speak——"

"For my good—" interrupted Kinross, "I was sure of that."

"She's a dangerous woman," said Percival slowly.

"And I, poor innocent, may fall into her clutches? Don't worry on my account, dear Percival."

"She is an adventuress, Hartland—an unprincipled woman without scruple—heartless as they make 'em."

"She is a beautiful woman, Percival," returned Lord Kinross mildly, "without blemish—brainy as you can find 'em."

Percival sneered. "Are you going to marry this 'beauty'?"

"That is my affair," said Kinross sharply.

"Not wholly. I have some right to a voice in the matter, you must, you shall hear me."

"I will not listen to another word upon the matter. I dispute your right to question my actions, I repudiate you and your criticism. We look at things differently, you and I. It is the old, old difference between the sinner and the Pharisee. You've always been the good boy of the family, I as naturally the scapegrace. I know you helped me out of a tight place five years back, but you asked your price for it, Percival. A price I paid unflinchingly."

"You state the case unfairly. You were in a difficulty regarding what you were pleased to term 'a debt of honour.' Your father would not help you. You applied to me and I——"

"Like Providence you descended with the money and paid the debt. Remember, however, that in return I pledged my word not to touch cards until I was twenty-five. Remember also that while that promise undoubtedly saved me from ruin, it also saved the estate to which you are the heir at law."

"I did not credit you with so much meanness, Hartland I had your interests at heart when I got that promise from you. Mine are and were independent of you and the estate. When I took the name of 'Hope' I succeeded to an income far larger than I am ever likely to spend. I interfered then, as last year in Paris, and to-day in London, on your account."

"I quarrelled with you over the affair in Paris, and said I'd never speak to you again. I got over my anger and since you've been in town we've been pretty friendly. This time, however, I bar you altogether. Lift a finger to interfere with me, or what I choose to do and——"

"Well," said Percival, "what then?"

"I'll cut you for the rest of my life."

"Hartland be reasonable. You're no schoolboy to be taken in by a woman like Mrs. Norton."

"What is it you have against her? Speak it out, say something definite. I'm tired of hints and innuendos. What has she done—say?"

"At present I can give you no proofs. Wait a fortnight and I will bring you evidence of what I say. The woman is an adventuress living on her wits, a sharper existing on the credulity of fools, a swindler who profits by nefarious transactions. Her very name is probably as false as her life—how do you know the woman was ever married?"

"She—" he stopped. With quickened breath, a flame of fury in my heart and on my face I stood before him.

"How dare you, oh how dare you?" I cried fiercely. "No wonder you pretended to be friendly with me and offered to get me an engagement as governess. You wanted me to spy upon my cousin, to tell you tales about her, so that you could make up lies. I was present when my cousin married Richard Norton at the consulate in Bruges. You can go there and see the names entered in the book. You can question Lady Gaveston, you can write to the convent at Bruges where Frankie and I were brought up. A swindler, an adventuress! You know," I turned to Lord Kinross, "you know how my cousin gets her income, tell him, tell him, I say, that Frankie sold her husband's estate, and invested the proceeds."

"It's true, Percival," stammered his lordship, "quite true."

"And I, what am I? As bad as my poor cousin, I suppose, or worse."

"Cynthia," Percival implored me, "listen. You did not understand what I meant about your cousin, please God you never will. Of you I have had no thoughts but what were good, honest and sweet. I wanted to help you, I wanted——"

I stopped him with a gesture.

"Do you still say my cousin was not married to Richard Norton?"

"I believe what you have told me."

"You acknowledge she is Richard Norton's widow?"

"Yes."

"Lord Kinross has told you how my cousin's income is derived. Do you still say she is a swindler, an adventuress?"

"For your sake I would do much," said Percival, "but even for you I can't take that back. Wait for a fortnight, Cynthia, you shall then judge for yourself if I am right."

"And give you time to trump up a few more charges? No, thank you." I walked towards the door. "I am going to call my cousin and tell her before you both what you have said."

"For Heaven's sake, Cynthia"—Lord Kinross rushed after me. Percival stepped between us.

"A moment," he said quietly and looked at me firmly, almost sorrowfully. His manner had quite changed, he was grave and stern. "I must tell you," he said slowly, "that if you inform Mrs. Norton of what you overheard, I shall deny your statement *in toto*. Yes," he repeated, "I shall swear you have imagined the whole story."

I looked at him, his strong square face, and steady eyes, and even as I hated, I believed him. He would do as he had said—deny it all, and Kinross would back him up. What could I do? I was powerless against such a man.

"Oh, you are cruel and wicked," I exclaimed, "bad men, both of you. I—I——" The sentence was not finished. I broke into passionate sobbing. Percival looked horrified, and grief-stricken. Kinross hardly less comfortable.

"Don't," said his lordship, "my dear little girl, *don't*."

"Why should you care?" I asked through my tears.

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"You despise Frankie and let people talk ill of her. I wish she'd never seen you. You don't really care for her. Why don't you go and never, never come back. Frankie would be happy with Sir John, he's a good man and loves her truly. But for you she'd have married him long ago. I can't think what she sees in you. Sir John is just as rich. Oh yes," Kinross made a movement of surprise, "he's making lots of money in the City, he's better looking and much, much more loveable. Why don't you leave her alone? You can't really be fond of her."

Kinross caught his breath and murmured something about feeling like a cad.

"I must go," he said, "I *can't* stand this."

"Yes," said Percival, "we'd better leave." He paused and touched me lightly on the shoulder.

"Just at present you think very hardly of me," he said softly. "But in time you won't feel quite so bitter. Cynthia"—he paused, "some day I shall come to you," he said, "and ask forgiveness. You won't refuse it me."

I heard the door close behind them, I heard Frankie meet and greet them in the hall, the deeper tones of Fluffy chiming in. Kinross even made an arrangement to meet her the next morning in the Park! I listened to it all and remembered that Fluffy's warning to my cousin not to see Lord Kinross that evening. Why had he warned her? Was he base and treacherous like the rest, did he mean to turn on Frankie like the others?

I could not quiet myself but sat and sobbed till the door opened once again and Frankie entered.

"Well," she asked eagerly, "what did they say? Did you hear anything about me? Make haste, Cynthia, and tell me. Fluffy will be back directly."

I paid no heed to the questions, but ran quickly to my cousin, clasping her tightly with both arms.

"Send me back to the convent, Frankie," I sobbed, "where they don't say wicked, cruel things. I can't stay here, I can't."

With a firm hand, Frankie unclasped my arms and led me upstairs to her bedroom.

"Drink this," she said and made me take some brandy. "Are you quieter?" She put her hand on my head. "Yes, you are better already. Now," she faced me, pale but with a strange light in her eyes, "what has Percival Hope been saying?"

(Next Tuesday's SHORT STORIES contains another striking instalment of "Cynthia's Confessions.")

MR. E. CONOMIE: "Did you write to that man who advertises to show people how to make puddings without milk, and have them richer?" Mrs. E. Conomie: "Yes, and sent him the shilling." "What did he reply?" "Use cream."

MISS FITZGUSH (examining photo): "What a wrinkled, old, funny-looking cat! Who is she?" Miss Clevergirl: "I make it do duty for my sweet self, love. Many men are not allowed to engage a typewriter unless their wives see the applicant's photo, so when I look for a place I send that thing (after having called at the place previously, you know); so the governor shows the photo to his better half, and the dear, deluded thing is usually quite contented."

WE were very much amused by an incident related the other day. A gentleman who had been absent for a considerable time, and who during his absence had raised a pretty luxuriant crop of whiskers, moustachios, etc., visited a relative, whose child, an artless little girl of five or six years, he was very fond of. The little girl made no demonstration towards saluting him with a kiss, as was usual. "Why, child," said the mother, "don't you give Uncle P. a kiss?" "Why, ma," returned the little girl, with the most perfect simplicity, "I don't see any place."

Your Editor Chats.

"THE CONFESSIONS OF CYNTHIA" seem to have aroused a great amount of interest amongst readers of *Short Stories*. One reader, who claims to be "a member of the middle-class," confesses to a mild degree of astonishment at the revelations as to the ways of polite society made in these exposures. "Formerly," he says, "London society was supposed to comprise the fine flower of European aristocracy. Now, so far as one can gather, 'rogues' and 'adventuresses' are privileged members of the inner sets. Might I respectfully surmise that the disreputable state of things revealed by the 'CONFESSIONS OF CYNTHIA' owes much to Cynthia's feminine powers of exaggeration?"

I am regretfully compelled to confess that such a surmise on the part of my correspondent would be wrong. Unfortunately, the state of affairs described by Cynthia is only too true, and if the revelations had not been startling—as they certainly are—then I, as editor of your little paper, would not have accepted them. The fact of their showing society in its true light struck me as making them of more than ordinary interest, and being always on the look-out for good things for my readers I accepted them. Great truths are oft-times unpalatable reading.

Again, a lady reader writes to me the following letter:

"Some three weeks back a friend handed me a number of *Short Stories*. I had not before seen the paper. I was immediately interested in 'THE CONFESSIONS OF CYNTHIA' and have been since, so much so that I am writing to you upon the matter. I want you to tell me, in confidence, Cynthia's real name. About two years ago I met, at a seaside boarding-house, a woman of the Frankie Norton type, with a sweet young girl as companion. The poor thing was sorely tried by her employer, who was bad-tempered as well as unscrupulous. I lost sight of the girl, and heard afterwards that she had left her situation. If, as I suspect, she and Cynthia are the same, I should be glad to hear from her. I may, perhaps, be of some assistance to the poor child."

I wrote to this correspondent to express my regrets that the conditions under which I accepted this series of articles did not permit me to reveal the true name of the young lady in question, but that, as it seemed from her letter that her reason for making inquiries was to offer assistance to Cynthia, I was in the happy position of being able to inform her that Cynthia is not in any want and is making quite a good thing out of her pen. It is quite possible that the people whom my correspondent met at the boarding-house were Mrs. Norton and Cynthia, but no good can come of pursuing inquiries further merely out of curiosity.

I am now able to announce the result of the Sub-titles Competition. The first prize of a massive solid silver pencil-case goes to Mr. S. P. Hopkins, Kew Estate Office, Kew Green, S.W., while consolation gifts of cut glass solid silver-topped scent bottles and silver bangles go to the following ten contestants: Mrs. Macdonald, 4 Amberley Grove, Leopold Street, Leeds; H. Barnes, 2 Vauxhall Walk, S.E.; H. H. Hearn, 12 Conrad Street, Hackney, N.E.; J. Berlin, 5 Great Peter Street, Westminster Abbey; J. Jones, 5 Worcester Place, Swansea; S. Keenan, 19 Balmano Street, Glasgow; Mrs. Kelly, 27 Maryfield, London Road, Edinburgh; R. Thomson, 5 West Montgomery Place, Edinburgh; E. Payne, 73 London Road, Clapton, N.E., and G. K. Stubbs, 4 Victoria Terrace, Longsight, Manchester.

For *this week's competition* I want you to construct a sentence using only words containing four letters. The reader who sends the longest and most sensible sentence made up of such words will receive a handsome barbaric guard, while the ten readers whose efforts come next will receive gifts of pretty rolled gold hearts and rolled gold charms. Postcards only should be sent, and these must reach us not later than first post on Tuesday morning, July 22nd. They should be marked "sentence" and addressed to the Competition Editor, SHORT STORIES, Henrietta Street, W.C.

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Breaking it Gently.

IT is related that a man once had to break the news to a woman that her husband had been killed. "Do you know," he said, calling at her house, "that with your light hair and pretty complexion you would break every heart in town if you dressed as a widow?" She blushed and laughed. "And you are one," he added. "Your husband was just blown to atoms down in the boiler works. But then, black is so becoming to you!"

A Dear Girl.

"OLD fellow, I'm engaged to Miss Dashe. She's a dear girl." "She is so. She cost me about £100 the time I was engaged to her."

Necessary Elements.

"So you have written a novel?" "Yes." "Has your heroine satin skin, velvet eyelashes, and hair like threads of spun gold?" "Yes." "Is her name Gwendoline?" "It is." "Then I don't see why it shouldn't be a success."

The Very Reason.

JONES: "I'm going to bring my wife round to call on you to-night." Smith: "That's right; but do me a favour, old man. Don't let her wear her new cloak; I don't want my wife to see it just now." Jones (grimly): "Why, that's what we are coming for."

An Inducement.

WIFE: "Why did you stand and talk so long with that Turkish pedlar?" Husband: "I was trying to convert him." "Hum! Fine missionary you would be. What did you tell him?" "I told him that a Christian was not obliged to have more than one wife."

Mamma Lived Somewhere Else.

SHE: "You won't object to have my dear mamma live with us after we are married, will you?" He (a young physician): "Not at all. In fact, she'll be most welcome." "I'm so glad you feel that way." "Yes; you see she is always ailing, and I really need somebody to experiment on."

Didn't Like to Look.

SOME children were trespassing in a field, and quite happily gathering flowers. Presently a keeper came up to them saying angrily: "Now, then, what business have you to be in here? Didn't you see the notice at the gate?" "Oh, yes, please sir," answered one little girl, "we saw a notice, but it had 'private' on it, so we didn't like to look."

A Gentle Hint.

THEY had been engaged to be married fifteen years, and still he had not mustered up courage enough to ask her to name "the happy day." One evening he called in a peculiar frame of mind and asked her to sing something tender and touching, something that would "move him." She sat down at the piano and sang, "Darling, I am growing old."

The Force of Habit.

A WIDOWER is being married for the fourth time. During the ceremony one of the guests is surprised to hear violent sobs proceeding from a woman in a corner of the church. "Who is that lady who is crying so bitterly?" he asks of the bystanders. "Oh, it's only Martha, our cook," answers one of the bridegroom's children; "she always blubbers when papa gets married."

A Story Telling Picture.

HE: "Well, for my part I like a picture that tells a story." She: "Mrs. Witherby's portrait ought to suit you then. It makes her positively handsome."

Wanted His Face Washed.

LITTLE ETHEL: "Mamma, I wish you'd wash Willie Prettie's face." Mamma: "The idea! He's not my little boy. I have nothing to do with him." Little Ethel: "But I have. We's become engaged, an' I want to kiss him."

Accounted For.

BERTHA: "Sometimes you appear really manly, and sometimes you are absolutely effeminate. How do you account for it?" Harold: "I suppose it is hereditary. Half my ancestors were males and the other half females."

An Unpublished Testimonial.

FIRST QUACK: "Here is a letter it would hardly do for us to publish. A man writes: 'I have taken the first bottle of your medicine——'" Second Quack: "Well?" First Quack: "There it breaks off short, and is signed in another handwriting, 'per Executor.'"

The Last Chance.

"DID you ever notice," said Mrs. N. Peck, "that about half of the pictures in the photographers' windows are of bridal couples? I wonder why they always rush off to a photographer as soon as the knot is tied?" "I fancy the husband is responsible for it," said Mr. Peck. "He realises that it is about his last chance to ever look pleasant."

Didn't Even Crack.

CLARE was perched upon the fence-post, swinging her chubby legs and singing at the top of her sound little lungs. "Be careful, Clare," said her mother; "you might fall and break your bones. I'm afraid you'll get hurt." "Oh, don't be 'fraid," she answered reassuringly; "I did fall yesterday, and I never even cracked."

A Time to be Firm.

MISS OLDGIRL (coyly): "I had a strange dream the other night, Mr. Jones. I dreamed—only think!—that you and I were married and on our wedding tour. You don't know how real it seemed. Did you ever dream such a thing?" Mr. Jones (firmly): "No, Miss Oldgirl, I did not. In fact, I haven't had the nightmare for a good many years."

Animal Intelligence.

THE common opinion is that animals do not know enough to be superstitious. Here is a possible exception:

"I tell you what," said Mr. Watts, "I saw a remarkable exhibition of animal intelligence to-day!" "What was that?" said Mr. Potts. "Why, a bridal party started from the house across the street from where I live, and one of the horses threw a shoe."

She Got a New One.

THEY were going out, and she sat down while her husband got into his overcoat. "I don't believe you love me any more," she said with a sigh. "I am convinced of it," and her voice trembled a little. "Not love you, my dear? Why, how absurd! Must I tell you every moment that I love you—love you with all my soul?" "Oh, that will do to say, but I know you care for me no longer. How can you love me in this old hat?"

Not Quite What He Meant.

WIFE (who has just returned from the dentist's): "I shall be awfully stupid now." Husband: "Why so, my dear?" Wife: "I have had all my wisdom teeth pulled out." Husband (with the best intention in the world): "Of course, my love, you know it's nothing but a superstition the idea that wisdom teeth have anything to do with wisdom. If you were to have every tooth in your head drawn it couldn't make you any stupider, you know." He succeeded in smoothing matters over, but it was a narrow escape.

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Another Woman's Child.

(A Story in Two Parts.—*conclusion.*)

THE FIRST HALF OF THE STORY.

ALECK BAYNES has jilted the girl who loves him for his cousin, Hilda Baynes, a beautiful and a wealthy girl. Joyce, his former sweetheart, is broken-hearted when she hears of it, and, feeling very bitter against Hilda, whom she declares has stolen Aleck from her, resolves to have her revenge when opportunity offers.

Later on Joyce marries a man who had loved her for years, and by a curious coincidence, Hilda Baynes, now a widow, comes to their home in search of rooms for herself and her unborn child. Full of sympathy for a sister in distress, Joyce takes her in and nurses her. This kindness Hilda rewards by running away as soon as she is well enough, leaving her baby for Joyce to look after, with a little money, and a sarcastic note in which she explains that she has left her child to be a companion to Joyce's own baby.

The next we hear of Hilda Baynes is that she is married to Sir Alfred Trevor, and is one of the most beautiful and most wealthy ladies in London.

But Joyce discovers her and sends her a note. The note reads: "You must come to me or I will come to you.—JOYCE CARNEGIE."

IN a tiny garret far east of the Trevor's great mansion, a woman sat sewing for her life. She was young, and might once have been pretty, but want and sorrow, and the marks of a mortal disease, had carved lines upon her face which told their own sad tale. Her clothes, though neat, were worn and patched, the room in which she sat told of the poverty of its occupant. The furniture was of the barest—a table, two chairs, and a bed constituted the whole, with the exception of a cradle at the feet of the woman, whose eyes glanced lovingly now and then at its occupant. The window, high up in the wall, showed many broken panes, a few sickly plants struggled for life on the sill.

The woman sighed as she sewed. Life was a weary fight for her now.

"Will she come, I wonder?" so her thoughts ran. "Will my long patience be rewarded at last? Is my revenge at hand? And is the woman who stole my lover to be delivered up to me at last?" A smile of triumph stole over the wasted features upon which disease and misery had set their marks so plainly. "If I had gone to her husband—to this great Sir Alfred, with the story, he would never have believed me. If she comes here, I shall be able to make my own terms—my own terms." She laughed softly, then she sighed, a bitter sigh, as the past came flooding back upon her memory. She saw again, as if it had been yesterday, her parting with Aleck in the orchard. She heard his low pleading voice saying: "Ah! Joyce, keep my secret, forgive me, and keep my secret!" Well! she had kept the secret whilst he lived; she had done more, she had tended his widow in her trouble—and how had Hilda repaid her? In the flash of recollection Joyce saw herself standing in that empty room in her house, from which Hilda had fled, leaving behind her a helpless babe! At the remembrance Joyce set her teeth hard.

"She left the child to me," she muttered, "her delicate child to me—a young mother myself. Hard, selfish, cruel—it is time she was taught a sharp lesson. She will come here to-day in deadly terror, lest I should make her secret marriage known to the world. Ah! my lady, you will see now that you cannot sin with impunity, my revenge is close at hand!"

There was a step upon the stair, and Joyce lifted her head, the smile about her mouth grew, as someone knocked at the door, and she said softly: "Come in."

The door opened slowly and cautiously, the woman inside the room rose to her feet.

"Is it you?" she said, when her visitor had entered the room, "you—at last?" And her glance never left the face of the other woman who looked round the garret with a look that held in it something of fear.

"Why did you write to me?" was the answer, in a low, hoarse voice. "How did you know that I——"

"How did I know that the Hilda Trevor of to-day was the Hilda Baynes of a year ago? Oh! I found out that little fact by the common process of putting two and two together. So! You hid from your husband all knowledge of the past. You never hinted at the weeks you passed in my lodgings, when I tended you as though you were my own kin? What will he say when I tell him that his wife——"

"You must never tell him," cried Hilda. "I—I have come to you to-day to say to you that he must never be told. I—I thought it best to keep the past from him. It was not necessary that he should know——"

Before the scornful glance in the other's eyes, her voice trailed into silence.

"What a pleasant little surprise for him when he learns the truth," Joyce said calmly.

"You must never tell him!" Hilda made a quick step forward and laid a hand on the arm of the little sempstress. "Joyce Carnegie, listen to me. I have acted for the best. My husband would never have forgiven me had he known my secret. I could not tell him—I *cannot* tell him. But—I have come to offer you anything you like to ask me, if only you will be silent."

"To bribe me?" Joyce answered slowly. "You guess, and you guess rightly, that money is precious to me. I have come down in the world since you knew me. My husband died, and I—I sank and sank to this," she waved her arm towards her dreary room, "I am dying of consumption—I am deadly poor, money *is* a temptation to me, but—revenge is sweeter."

"Revenge?" Lady Trevor looked at her with terror in her eyes.

"Yes, revenge! Do you know that it was I—I—I from whom you stole your first husband, Aleck Baynes?" Lady Trevor uttered a cry of horror, and shrank back towards the door. "Ah! Now you are beginning to understand! I have never forgiven you for that. I was good to you a year ago, because you were ill and in trouble. Then you repaid my kindness by leaving your child upon my hands? Oh! the reasons for revenge are growing apace, are they not?" And she smiled into the other's white terrified

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face. "You thought you would cut the knot of all your difficulties by running away from my house, and leaving no clue. You married a rich man, you are courted, honoured, made much of, your plan *seems* to have worked well! But it is only seeming, because—I—have found you out at last!"

"Listen!" Hilda cried. "I—I am very, very sorry for what has passed. I see you are poor. I see you have a great burden of care. I will help you. I will give you money—any amount in reason that you like to name, if you will promise silence about my past. Let me do what I can for you, and I beseech you give me your pledge of silence."

Joyce broke into soft laughter once more.

"No! I will not touch your money! Your husband shall know—and you shall tell him!"

Lady Trevor was desperate. She walked slowly to the door, gathering her rich robes about her, lest they might touch the dust-flecked walls. At the door she paused and turned her head to the woman in tattered garments.

"I defy you!" she said, her lip curling in scorn. "I defy you to come near my house!"

Joyce sank to her knees beside the cradle. She would win yet!

"Your child is asleep," she said quietly, after a moment's silence.

Lady Trevor reeled under the blow.

"*My child!*" Her voice rose to a scream. "Are you mad? That child cannot be mine! That is your baby, not mine—you are mad. My baby, I thought that my baby——"

Joyce looked up at Lady Trevor with flashing eyes.

"Ah! Yes, I guess what you would say. You thought—you mean you hoped—that your baby was dead. Poor mite, little wonder if it had died. But when you deserted it, I cared for it. This is your child. My baby died—yours lived. The child is yours!"

"Woman, you lie—you lie—it is impossible." Lady Trevor's voice rose in a storm of anger.

"It is yours," Joyce repeated firmly. "Pity! for your child's sake!"

"*My* child! No, *your* child!"

"Hear me! It is not money that I want from you, but for your child's sake do what I ask. I am dying, you can see it for yourself. The doctor has told me so. I beseech you acknowledge the child, take it to your own home, give it its rights. I am willing to die in poverty, but grant me this prayer I make you for the sake of your child!"

With a dramatic gesture Joyce swept the baby from its cradle and held it out towards Hilda, "for the sake of your child!" she said once more.

"Whose child?" A man's voice said the words, a voice so sharp, so stern, so unexpected, that both women turned with a gasp towards the door. In their conflict they had not heard this step upon the stair, and both Lady Trevor and Joyce Carnegie stood spell-bound, whilst the newcomer looked from one to the other in speechless amazement.

"It is my husband," Hilda murmured, every trace of colour leaving her face. "Good God, he has found me—here."

"What does this mean?" Sir Alfred spoke at last after a long and pregnant silence. His words came slowly, his face had blanched when he saw the fear in his wife's eyes. "What does it all mean?"

By a great effort Lady Trevor recovered her self-assurance.

"It means," she said, "that this woman is attempting to blackmail me, by pretending, pretending, that the child yonder is—mine."

"*Yours!* Hilda, are you mad?"

"It is this woman who makes mad assertions—not I!" Hilda spoke more confidently, the incredulity in her husband's voice gave her new courage. Sir Alfred strode across to Joyce's side.

"Who are you who dare make such statements about my wife?" he said. "And whose is the child you hold in your arms?" Joyce stood motionless, and the child lay looking from one to the other of those about it with big frightened eyes.

"My name is Joyce Carnegie," Joyce replied, "the child is your wife's. It was born in my house, where I cared for her and for it. I——"

All at once, in sight of the terrible dismay that overspread her husband's face, Hilda's self-control gave way. With a low cry, she flung herself upon Sir Alfred.

"Alfred—Alfred," she cried, "I will tell you—I will tell you——"

"Tell me the truth," he said hoarsely, pushing her away from him, and holding her at arms' length, "this is no time for lies, tell me the truth. I shall believe every word you say." For a moment the eyes of husband and wife met, then Hilda's fell. Her self-control had utterly deserted her. She laughed, a low mirthless laugh, that made him shiver. She was too terrified and blinded by emotion to realise that even now the game lay in her own hands—her husband would believe whatever she chose to say—*now!* Five minutes later it would be too late.

No realisation of all this crossed her mind. Goaded by fear, she spoke with reckless haste and bitterness.

"I suppose it *is* my child," she said. Sir Alfred cried out in dismay, "it is useless to deny it if that woman swears to its identity. I did not tell you before because, because, I knew how you hated deceit."

"And so you deceived me?" he replied, in a tone of intense anguish. "I can forgive anything but deceit."

"I deceived you for your good and my own," Hilda said sullenly. "I was married before I married you. I married my cousin, Aleck Baynes. I was miserable as his wife. I was glad when he died. We were both miserable, he and I. The child was born after his death. It was born in Mrs. Carnegie's house. I—I hated it. It was a burden, a clog upon all my hopes, all my ambitions. Do not look at me as if I were a monstrosity! All women are not child lovers—I was not. The baby was delicate too. the doctor did not think it would live long. I thought—I thought it must have died long ago."

For the first time her voice shook, and Sir Alfred asked sternly:

"Are you going to tell me you deserted your child—your own child?"

"What could I do?" she cried impetuously. "Could I begin life again, hampered by a child? I tell you my marriage with Aleck was a secret, no one knew of it. I had not even told my mother. Could I have gone back to my parents, who imagined me to be staying with a school friend, and told them all my story, taking a baby with me? No! a thousand times no. They would have turned me out of their house. I tell you, I thought the child would die. I was sure it would die in early infancy. One day I sent Mrs. Carnegie and her husband out. Then—I went away. I left some money and a letter for Mrs. Carnegie. She loved children, she had told me so scores of times. She had a baby only a little older than mine. I was not fit for the care of a child. I went away, and left the child behind. I have never heard of it again until to-day."

The cool cynicism with which she spoke—the indifference of her voice—the icy calmness of her manner, roused Sir Alfred to a white heat of fury.

"Are you a woman at all?" he said. "And can you speak in this way of your own child? I believed I loved you—but—it was a *woman* that I thought I loved! Are you dead to all sense of womanly feeling and goodness?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and again her reckless laugh rang through the room.

"The game is up," she said dramatically, with a little hysterical laugh. "I need dissemble no longer. Why pretend to be what I am not, what I never was? You will never forgive me for having deceived you! You have found out the truth now, and henceforth——"

"Henceforth," he said sternly, "justice shall be done to this poor child, whom you have foresworn. Of forgiveness towards you, I cannot even think, much less speak. I do not know—I cannot imagine what the future may have in store for you and me." His voice trembled—if ever heart-

(*Concluded at foot of next page.*)

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The Great "PASS-IT-ALONG" Scheme.

FIRST AWARD £10.

SECOND AWARD £5.

THIRD AWARD £2.

Six awards of 10s. each.

AN ENTIRELY NEW FORM OF MONEY MAKING.

This novel and clever scheme will be continued in next Tuesday's SHORT STORIES. For the benefit of those who have not seen our previous announcements, we give below a rough idea of the scheme, so that they may be prepared for next Tuesday's offer.

Every person who buys a copy of "SHORT STORIES" will have the opportunity of entering for this scheme by first of all writing his or her name and address on a space which will be found at the foot of one of the pages, and then sending the copy of the paper to a friend whom the competitor thinks will be likely to sign *his* or *her* name in a space provided. This friend of yours will then post the copy to a friend of *his* or *hers*, and so your copy will go from one person to another for fourteen days, when you will find it returned to you. Then you simply send the copy to us, under the conditions which you will find next week, and if it contains more names than that sent by anyone else

You will get £10, and every person who has signed your papers will get £1 each.

Your whole expenses will be one stamp for sending a copy of *Short Stories* to your friend. Your friend, and his or her friends and friends pay the other postage. If, however, you don't want to send your own copy away, and you can't get a friend to give you his or her copy (readers, you will find, don't like parting with their copy of dear little *S. S.*), then why not get an extra copy of the next number, as thousands of other readers will do?

The copy will cost you one penny, and may bring you £10.

But don't leave it till Tuesday before you ask for your extra copy, or you will find your newsagent is sold out. Just ask him to keep it by for you till you call on Tuesday for it. . .

Next Week's Number, we may add, will be a splendid one. The cover depicts a beautiful young girl being escorted out of church by the churchwarden. Why? Well, that will be explained in the paper in a powerful and thrilling story which the picture illustrates.

Altogether, next week's number will be worth twopence in itself. But there's no need to pay twopence for it—only one penny. You get two copies for twopence—one to keep for reading, and one to make £10. . . . . . .

break looked out of a man's eyes, it looked out of his then. "Your child shall not stay a day longer in this miserable home. The truth shall be told to all the world. I will allow no further deceit." Lady Trevor tried to speak, but he silenced her by a gesture. Turning to Joyce, he said gently:

"Words are poor things with which to thank you for your goodness to another woman's child. My thanks will be shown by deeds. I will make arrangements at once for bringing you and the child to my house." Hilda uttered a suppressed cry, but again her husband silenced her. "Every thing that we can do, Mrs. Carnegie, to make amends to you for all that you have suffered, shall be done. And now, Hilda, come"—he looked coldly at his wife, who shrank away from him with a shiver—"come home, and God grant that in time your heart may be softened. Come."

Standing back to allow her to pass out, he threw open the door for her ceremoniously, then followed her slowly down the stairs, the sound of their footsteps gradually dying away in the ears of the woman in the garret, who stood silently where they had left her, the child held close and warm against her heart, a smile of triumph upon her face—

For—the child she held in her arms *was not Hilda's, but her own!* Joyce's triumph was complete—she had made Hilda confess—her revenge was revenge indeed.

L. G. Moberley.

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OUR THRILLING NEW SERIAL.

OUT OF GREAT TRIBULATION.

By HENRY FARMER.

The Thread of the Story.

A BELT full of diamonds has been stolen from a safe belonging to Mr. Mansfield, a wealthy banker, by Seaton Revelle (who is a friend of the banker's) and an accomplice named Benjamin Beard. Revelle accuses Alec Scarsdale, who is in love with Esther, Mr. Mansfield's daughter, of the crime, and he is sentenced to sixteen years' penal servitude.

Mr. Crump, late Chief-Inspector at Scotland Yard, feeling sure Scarsdale is innocent and Revelle is guilty, determines to prove the latter's guilt.

Mr. Mansfield as fully believes in Scarsdale's guilt as does Esther in his innocence, and his friendship for Revelle increases. Revelle constantly visits the banker's house in an endeavour to win Esther's love, but so far has not prospered at all. While talking with the girl one day, Mr. Mansfield's new maid, Vance, enters the room with a tray bearing cups of coffee. No sooner does she catch sight of Revelle than she drops the tray, and, pointing to Revelle, screams: "That—that man is *my* husband!" But Revelle, by sheer force of will, compels her to acknowledge her mistake.

At about this time Esther and Mr. Crump are walking together when they observe Vance about to throw herself into the reservoir. Crump stops her just in time—he and Esther taking her back to The Woodlands. Later on she is placed in the county asylum.

In the meanwhile Scarsdale manages to pass through several letters to Esther to which she receives replies full of hope and affection. On account of an assault upon a brutal warder, however, he is to be removed to Wrackham Convict Prison, an establishment famous for its hard discipline.

A charity concert is now announced, in which both Esther and Benny are billed to take part. Revelle, of course, is present; so also is Mr. Crump. It is while returning from this concert that Revelle proposes to Esther but is refused.

The great balloon incident now approaches. There is to be a grand *fête* in Lord Normanhurst's grounds, the chief and closing event being a balloon ascent by Mr. Seaton Revelle. Everything goes well till two horsemen arrive with the news that Vance has escaped from the asylum.

Acting upon Crump's advice they go straight to the reservoir, but fail to find the missing girl. The search is given up at nightfall. Shortly before nightfall Revelle makes his ascent. A storm, however, compels him to come down, the anchor touching ground on a neighbouring common just where Vance is waiting for him. The girl clings on to the anchor, and Revelle, quickly making a terrible resolve, throws out a number of sandbags, and the balloon again rises and continues its flight till Warham reservoir is reached. Just as the balloon is passing over the water Revelle cuts the anchor rope.

Vance's dead body is found next morning, Mr. Crump being informed of the discovery while walking with Esther.

FOUND DROWNED!

"IN the reservoir!"

The man jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"In the far end. They were cutting the weeds. I'm going for the police!"

The man hurried away. Esther had already reached the house.

"That idiot of an inspector!" rasped out Crump fiercely. "If watch had been kept through the night, this might have been prevented! Now it's too late, and a life's been sacrificed, just for the want of a little thought!"

But, though the little man's indignation was righteous, he was mistaken. The tragedy would have taken place all the same; but, had watch been kept by the reservoir, some clue might have been furnished as to how the poor creature found her way into the water. The look of anger on Crump's face gave place to one of deep sorrow.

"I can't do any good!" he muttered, "and yet——"

He passed out into the road, and set out towards the reservoir. Few men had seen more of the grim side of life than Crump; but it had not made him callous, nor was it the morbid spirit of curiosity that was taking him to the reservoir. It was the detective instinct which was as strong within him now as it had been in the days of active service. He believed that the poor creature had taken her own life; but he had jumped at the conclusion that, though she had denied herself, there was foundation for those words, "That man is my husband!" and even in death something might be revealed. It was his duty to investigate.

Not far from the sluices that controlled the outflow of the water stood a shed, used for keeping tools and housing a boat. Three or four men stood outside talking in whispers. "Mr. Penworthy" was known to them.

"Too late to save her, this time!" said one of the men in a low voice.

"Poor woman!" said Crump very softly, and with a dimming of his bright, little eyes. "The All-merciful will, I dare to think, has granted her the rest she sought!"

He was visibly affected. To him the woman with dull, spiritless eyes, and a face from which a former prettiness had been washed out, had been full of pathos.

Removing his hat, and with his grey head bowed a little he passed into the shed. The others did not follow him. He came to a standstill close to where they had laid her, and for a few moments did not stir, his lips moving a little, his hands pressing his hat to his chest. Then he raised up the tarpaulin that covered her.

He emerged some ten minutes later, a curious expression on his face.

"Where," he asked in a whisper of one of the men, "was she found?"

"Yonder!"

The man pointed away to where some weeds rose up out of the water, some distance from the bank.

"How deep is it there?" questioned Crump.

"Not more than four feet!"

The little man's expression was exceedingly thoughtful.

"Were the sluice-gates closed?"

"Yes."

"Then the water was absolutely still. When the sluice-gates are closed, I presume that there is no current?"

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"No."

The little man, looking in the direction of the distant weeds, seemed to be making a calculation.

"H'm!"

The intonation of the monosyllable told that something was puzzling him. The weeds were some distance from the bank. And also, while in the shed, he had made a discovery of an extraordinary nature—something that had evidently escaped the notice of those who had found the body.

"Is it deep between the bank and the weeds?"

"Yes, there's a regular dip."

"It was a long way from the bank for her to have been found!"

"Ah," said the man, "but I daresay, when she found herself in the water, and it was too late, she may have made a fight for life, struck out blindly in the dark, and kept afloat till she reached the shallower water, only to sink under from exhaustion. It must have been so. What else could have happened?"

Crump did not answer. His lips were pursed up. He was looking more puzzled than ever. He intended to make further investigations; but he preferred to wait. He did not wish to call attention to himself.

"Hullo," cried one of the men suddenly, "here comes the police, and Doctor Felton—not that he can do any good!"

Crump did not wait, but moved away slowly and thoughtfully. He was obviously perplexed.

"How was it," he muttered to himself, "that she came to be found so far away from the bank? And, granted that the theory that she had managed to struggle so far is correct, how is that broken leg to be accounted for?"

One of the poor creature's legs was broken! The fact had escaped the notice of the men who had taken her from the water; but not Crump's!

"I certainly must be present at the inquest. I am altogether mystified. Later in the day I must have another look round; but I do not wish to call attention to myself; and earn the reputation of being a poke-nose. But I am absolutely puzzled. If her leg was broken before she jumped into the water, it seems to me impossible for her to have struggled through the deep water into the shallow. At the same time, it does not seem possible that, jumping into deep water, she could have broken her leg in doing so. I may be wrong; but I feel that I am face to face with a most extraordinary mystery. I am very much puzzled. I feel very, very much tempted to jump to the conclusion that this is not a case of suicide."

"Yes," he said to himself, when presently he emerged from the wood. "I'm glad that Miss Mansfield is going away. There is a gloom gathering over this place. I hope, sincerely hope, that she will get away at once, before the inquest!"

Then he lapsed again into a brown study.

"Ah!" he ejaculated suddenly, then brought his teeth together with a sharp snap.

He had jumped at a conclusion, and the next moment had told himself that he was mad for having done so.

"I think that I am suffering from Jim, balloons, and parachutes on the brain! I really must watch myself most carefully!"

He drew out a letter, and, having torn off the half-sheet, proceeded to scribble down some jottings in pencil as he walked along—grim jottings that referred to the dead woman's dress and personal appearance.

He was looking very sad and depressed when he reached The Woodlands.

* * * * *

"I am glad to see you back safely, sir. I have passed an anxious night thinking of you. Mr. Faversham has been equally anxious on your behalf. Allow me, sir!"

The silent Railton took from Revelle his hat and heavy overcoat.

"Yes, it was a nasty night, and so dark that I lost my bearings, Railton. I landed at a Heaven-forsaken hole called Ocklington. Only one inn in the place, and it took me nearly an hour to wake 'em up!"

Seaton Revelle was looking a trifle grey and haggard, as he made his way into the billiard-room where Benny was idly knocking the balls about, and speculating as to how it had fared with the Marquis.

"You hit your ball a little too full!"

Benny, who had just failed to run in off the red, turned sharply to see the Marquis standing on the threshold, a faint smile playing round his lips.

"Back!" he cried. "Thank goodness! I was beginning to get into a dickens of a funk about you! You haven't been careering about the sky all night, have you?"

"No. Landed at Ocklington shortly after midnight. Got them to put me up at the inn there."

"What have you done with the balloon? You haven't brought it back with you in your pocket, have you?"

"No; but it's packed up, and I've left it at Ocklington to wait there till called for!"

"Well!" said Benny, with a genuine sigh of relief, "I'm jolly glad to see you back. And if I hadn't known that you always have the devil's own luck, I should have been still more anxious. But you always come down on to your feet!"

He glanced at Revelle's face.

"But, I say, you don't look any the better for your trip!"

Revelle carefully selected a cue from the rack, and, having placed the billiard balls into approximately the same position that they had occupied when he had entered the room, neatly pocketed his ball off the red. Then he rang the bell and ordered brandy and soda-water.

"I say," said Benny, dropping his voice a little, and watching the effect of his words, "nothing's been heard of that poor woman who's escaped from the asylum!"

"Oh, is that so? They are bound to get her, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Well," said Revelle, as he helped himself to a cigarette from his case, "you see she was suffering from suicidal mania, and when a man or woman suffers from that, they generally succeed sooner or later!"

His cigarette lighted, he strolled towards the door.

"I'm just going to have a tub to freshen me up; then I shall take the cob out for a spin. You'd better come too."

"No, thank you!" said Benny, very promptly. "That cob gets on my nerves too much. Some other time, perhaps, later, very much later. But don't you worry about me. If I do anything, I shall go out for a spin on my bike. I prefer it. It hasn't a will of its own, nor hind legs to rise up upon and do a promiscuous sort of dance from one side of the road to the other!"

Revelle laughed, then went to his dressing-room. The mask fell from his face. His jaw dropped a little. his head sank forward; and suddenly, as if a cry had reached him, he drove his fingers into his ears. But he could not keep out that cry.

"Jim!"

The reaction had come now. Then he caught a glimpse of his own reflection in a mirror. The sight seemed to recall him. He steadied himself.

"*Oh, when I was single, oh, then,*
Oh, when I was single, oh, then,
Oh, when I was single, my pockets did jingle,
I long to be single again!"

It was Benny going to his room, and singing as he went the refrain of the song which had been such a success at the village concert.

"Single again!"

Mechanically Revelle repeated the words; then, through the open window, from which the road was visible, came the slow, rhythmic tramp of footsteps, heavy footsteps as of men carrying a burden. As though drawn by a magnet, Revelle approached the window, and, gripping the sill with a shaking hand, stared out.

Four men, carrying a hurdle on which lay something covered over with a piece of tarpaulin, passed into sight. A silent little crowd followed.

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OUR NEW SERIAL. YOU CAN BEGIN TO-DAY.

"Single again!"

Benny had reached his room and closed the door; but the words rang out audibly.

They were out of sight again, the bearers and the burden, the little crowd following.

Revelle reeled away from the window.

"Single again!"

BENNY COMES A "CROPPER."

"Yes, my father has wired to say that we are coming. We shall leave to-morrow for Gurlston Bay. After what has happened to-day"—Esther shivered—"I am more thankful than ever to think that I am going to get away from here for a little while; but—but do you think me a coward, Mr.—Mr. Penworthy?"

It was twilight, the close of the day that had witnessed the tragic discovery in Warham reservoir. Esther had left the house and had joined Crump. They were walking along a secluded garden path.

"My dear young lady," said the little man, "I, too, I am very thankful! No, no! I don't think you a coward, believe me. In your absence we shall be watching over your interests, doing our best for you—such as it is. I am glad!"

On the morrow the inquest was to be held on the poor woman found in the reservoir, and Crump was thankful to think that Esther would be away, right away from the place.

"Gurlston Bay," he went on, "a very pleasant place indeed; but perhaps you have been there before?"

"No!"

The little man was making conversation purposely with a view to distract Esther's thoughts.

"I was there some years ago. The cliffs are very fine and imposing. And there are caves that well repay a visit—quite a romantic history connected with these caves. They are, most of them, artificial, originally quarries; then, when quarry work was discontinued, they served as the head-quarters for smugglers. But, of course, the days of the bold, bad smuggler are long since things of the past—except in a certain form of fiction that caters for credulous youth!"

The little man's eyes twinkled.

"I took my young nephew Fred and his sister there. It's a good many years back now; but I can even now remember the look of disappointment on the little lad's face when reference to the guide-book showed that no smuggler had been seen or heard of in the neighbourhood for more than sixty years!"

The little man chuckled.

"I remember that we spent a very happy day in those caves, playing, most of the time, at being smugglers. At least Freddie and Katie were the bold, bad smugglers, and I had to content myself with the more virtuous, but less interesting part of their prisoner. I hope you won't find the journey wearisome; but you know the pace of some of these South Coast trains is not excessive, nor are they famous for their punctuality. Let me see, if I remember rightly, you will travel *via* Roxeter Junction!"

Roxeter Junction was the changing-place, not only for Gurlston Bay, but also for Wrackam—Wrackam, where the big convict prison was.

"What time are you starting, Miss Mansfield?"

"In the early morning. I think we shall have to leave here at about half-past nine!"

"Ah, well, though I shall be seeing you to-morrow, perhaps I had better be saying my real good-bye now—at least, good-bye for the present. You will, I trust, write to me. I shall take the liberty of writing to you. My letters will deal with other matters besides the progress that I am making with the front garden. I do hope, my dear young lady, that you will come back ever so much refreshed by your change. You will try not to brood—it is very easy for me to advise, I know—but you will try, won't you?"

The little man held out his hand.

"God bless you!" he said quietly and unaffectedly.

Esther went with him round to the front gates. They had reached them when the rattle of wheels sounded out, and, a moment later, a dog-cart came into sight.

Revelle reined up—he was alone—at the gates.

"Single again!"

Crump raised his hat, and retired into the background.

"Miss Mansfield," said Revelle, in a low, strained voice, "I'm supremely shocked at what has happened. Awful! I saw your father to-day. He tells me that you are going away to-morrow. I can quite understand that you will be glad to get away. There's a gloom over the place. Gurlston Bay you're going to, aren't you? It's a charming place. I know it well. I suppose I shan't be seeing you before you go. I hope the change will do you a world of good!"

"You infernal blackguard, sir!" said Crump to himself fiercely.

Revelle raised his hat. The dog-cart rattled away.

"Single again!"

"Oh, how I loathe you!"

The words had been whispered out from Esther's quivering lips. Crump was beside her again.

"We must be very patient," he said in a low voice, "very patient!"

Then, after some further whispered conversation, the little man again wrung her hand, and gave her his blessing.

It was a climb up to Woodbine cottage. Crump recognised the bicyclist who coasted down past him, his feet on the rests. It was Mr. Faversham.

"You're a blackguard, too!" said the little man to himself. "But you amuse me, in spite of myself!"

Esther still stood by the gates, staring wistfully into the deepening shadows.

A snapping sound, a sharp cry, then a thud and a metallic crash awakened her from her reverie.

She darted out into the road. A little distance away, a man lay stretched on the ground, not far from him a bicycle smashed almost beyond recognition.

Some women would have returned to the house for assistance. Esther promptly hurried towards the motionless figure on the ground. To go back and summon help meant loss of time. The man lay on his face, a thin stream of blood trickling from his forehead. Esther, trembling from head to foot, but retaining her presence of mind, knelt down, and, exerting all her strength, turned him over on to his back.

She started when her eyes rested on the white, motionless face of Mr. Faversham, Seaton Revelle's friend.

Benny Beard was a good rider, but even a good rider cannot hold up against the calamity of a broken brake. He had been badly thrown at the foot of the hill.

He was quite unconscious. Esther's womanly instinct was uppermost. She did not pause to think who or what he was. Whipping out her handkerchief, she staunched the flow of blood; then bound it round his head.

And when Benny opened his eyes it was to find Esther kneeling beside him and supporting him in her arms.

"You!" he muttered in dazed fashion. "You! Oh, yes, I remember now. Brake broke—somersault through space—smack on the head—forgetfulness."

"I hope you're not hurt badly, Mr. Faversham; you had better come into the house. We can send for the doctor."

Benny slowly rose to his feet. Beside being cut about the head, he had been severely bruised and shaken, but he was not a coward so far as physical pain was concerned.

"Thank you, Miss Mansfield. I wouldn't mind resting for a few moments. There's no need for a doctor; I'm all right, or shall be in a few minutes. It's very good of you, Miss Mansfield"—he raised his hand to his head, and for the first time realised that it was bandaged—"Hullo, and you've been and bandaged me up, too. I don't know how to thank you!"

Once within the house, Benny did not say "No" to a brandy-and-soda. It was the first time that he had been in John Mansfield's house since the night of the burglary. Esther had led the way into her father's study—the room containing the

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safe that had been robbed. The surroundings, the presence of Esther, made Benny, now that he had recovered his senses, feel decidedly uncomfortable. He gave a sigh of relief when Esther asked him to excuse her for a few moments. Left to himself, he stared at the safe.

"By Jove!" he muttered, "it's scarcely a year ago. I was standing here; the Marquis over there. I can almost fancy I hear the sound of those approaching footsteps. It makes my heart beat quicker to think of that moment."

He shivered.

"Confound it all, I wish I'd never had a hand in that wretched job! I wish I'd never met Esther Mansfield. Every time I see her face my conscience pricks me. And she looks at me sometimes as if she could see through me. Those great piteous eyes of hers, too! I haven't many virtues, but I can't bear the sight of a woman suffering. Confound the Marquis! He put up the job; he dragged me into it. It was the worst night's work I ever did!"

When Esther returned she was carrying bandages, and insisted on bandaging Benny's head afresh before he left the house. Never had he felt so uncomfortable. The woman whom he had helped to wrong so cruelly was, with the sweet tenderness of her sex, ministering to him. When he prepared to leave, he stammered and seemed strangely embarrassed as he again thanked her. He was conscious of her dark eyes bent searchingly upon his face.

He only breathed more freely when he had left the house, and was wheeling his wreck of a bicycle towards The Firs.

"If I saw much more of her, if I were constantly in her society," he muttered uneasily, "I should make an ass of myself. I'd blurt something out; she'd draw it out of me, in spite of myself. I'll have a chat with the Marquis to-night about getting away from this place. What the dickens is coming over me? I'm not sure of myself!"

"TILL DEATH!"

JOHN MANSFIELD and Esther, her arm linked in his, were pacing up and down the platform of Roxeter Junction.

"Dear me," said John Mansfield, impatiently, "that's the worst of these South Coast railways—trains are always late, and one never knows into which platform they are going to run. Porter, is this our train coming?"

"No, sir; yours is the next after this."

A long train had run into the platform, a third-class saloon attached to the rear.

Esther and her father were strolling along, watching the passengers disembark, when their attention was attracted by a crowd that was gathering round the last carriage. On reaching the outer edge of the little crowd, they saw two military-looking men in uniform, and wearing cutlasses, alight, and one of them called out—

"Now then, look sharp, tumble out, all of you. We've got to change here for Wrackham!"

"A batch of convicts," said someone close to Esther, "bound for Wrackham prison!"

The blood rushed from her cheeks. Convicts! Was not the man she loved a convict!

"Come away, Esther," said her father hurriedly, "it's a shame to stare at the poor fellows!"

But a paralysis held her motionless. White to her very lips she stared with dilated eyes at the carriage-door.

A clanking of chains fell on her ears. Three men linked together, in drab and arrow-stamped clothes, their hair close-cropped, the ugly prison cap perched on their heads, filed out of the carriage and moved across the platform to where another train was waiting.

She scarcely seemed to breathe. Her eyes scanned every face.

There was a moment's pause. Then another gang—a gang of four—filed out, a warder in front, a warder behind.

Again she scanned each face. The last man was differently dressed to the others—in a hideous parti-coloured dress of black and drab—and his legs as well as his hands were fettered.

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His face was haggard; the hair about his temples streaked with grey.

Esther reeled back. Her great brown eyes seemed to start from their very sockets.

"Alec!"

It was more of a scream than a cry.

Convict 35 stopped short. The chain tightened as the other convicts still moved mechanically forward. The sound of his name, the accompanying cry, had rooted him to the ground. His eyes had been bent down to avoid the staring looks of those gathered round. They were raised now! Was it only a phantom voice—a mocking echo of imagination? A choking, stifled gasp burst from his lips.

Then a mist seemed to obscure his vision; he saw the crowd, shadowy and indistinct, open out; he heard a voice hoarsely cry—"Esther, are you mad?" He was dimly conscious of a warder trying to interpose himself between him and a woman's figure that swiftly moved towards him. But the man had sprang forward too late.

Too late, thank God!

Too late to come between two hungering souls! Too late to mar the ecstasy of that impassioned embrace.

It was a scene that those present would never forget. Many of them witnessed it through a blur of blinding tears.

Surroundings—everything but the fact that they were together again—had been forgotten by the manacled convict and the beautiful woman who, her arms twined round his neck, had buried her face on the hideous, arrow-marked coat. They were as much alone as when they had watched the setting sun over the waters of Rushton Wood. The weary past, the doubtful future, were lost sight of and merged in that present moment. But it was a cruelly brief moment.

Shocked beyond measure and angered at what had occurred, John Mansfield, simultaneously with two of the warders, had sprung forward. He was almost beside himself. That unexpected meeting seemed likely to undo everything. He had hoped that Esther had forgotten Scarsdale. That meeting showed that it was not so. It must mean the re-opening of the wound that he had believed to be healed.

"Esther, come away, come away—this is disgraceful!"

Roughly he gripped her by the arm and tried to drag her away. He was a man of the old-fashioned school. His sense of propriety was outraged. The sight of his own daughter clinging to a prison-clad felon before a score or so of onlookers, filled him with shame. Never in his life had he felt so humiliated.

The two warders had seized Scarsdale by the shoulders, and roughly wrenched him back. John Mansfield had dragged Esther away, but, with an almost fierce movement she broke away from his grasp, and once more flung her arms round the convict. She raised her face, white as death now, to his, he bent down and kissed her!

"My love!—my love!" those who pressed round heard him whisper.

"Till death!" said the woman with a great choking sob.

The words had been spoken; the kiss had been given! The warders might strike him, they might tear them asunder now, but the words had been spoken, the kiss had been given!

"Shame, shame!"

The words had burst from the lips of more than one of the onlookers.

The warders had torn the convict away. In doing so one of them had deliberately struck him a blow with his clenched fist. They saw the convict, hampered as he was with handcuffs and chain, fiercely raise his manacled hands above his head; but the warders had closed with him before they could descend, and held him powerless. Other warders rushed to their assistance. For a moment it was impossible, owing to the confusion and hubbub, to notice what was happening. Then orders were shouted out, there was a clanking of chains, and the little convict gang, the last man held on either side by the warders, was hustled across the platform.

And Esther? Esther had fainted away in her father's arms. Scarsdale's last glimpse of her was as she was borne into the waiting-room. The warders who held him felt the muscles of his arms twitch as the mad desire to break from them, to rush to her side, surged through his brain, and they tightened their hold accordingly. His conduct had cast discredit upon them as warders, and they were furious. He was fettered hand and foot, and there was but little danger of retaliation. They did not spare him in that short transit across the platform to the train. One of them, who gripped the collar of his coat, found brutal satisfaction in jamming his knuckles into his neck. Another—the man against whom in that moment of passion he had raised his hands—twice contrived to strike him in the ribs with his elbow.

"You beauty," he muttered with a coarse oath. "You beauty, you ought to be strung up to the triangles and get six dozen for to-day's doings. I'll give you a character when we get to Wrackham. Go on, don't stare at me like that. Get into the carriage!"

And he emphasised his speech with another blow in the ribs. Worked up by all that had gone before, a prey to a hundred conflicting emotions, Scarsdale gnashed his teeth, and the light that shone from his eyes was fierce and merciless.

"You brute," he hissed, "if only I were free!"

"Go on. None of your lip. Into the carriage."

A few minutes later the engine snorted out a hoarse whistle and the train moved slowly out of the station. The whistle penetrated into the waiting-room, where Esther, surrounded by a little group of sympathetic women, was just opening her eyes. John Mansfield was there, kneeling beside her; his anger had given way to grief. He loved his child and would have given half his possessions that she might have been spared that meeting.

"Esther, my Esther, are you better?"

She did not answer him; but the look in her tearless, staring eyes was more than he could bear. He turned his head aside. One of the ladies present—a sweet-faced woman, whose hair was streaked with silver—whispered something to him; then led him away. Returning, she sat down beside Esther, and, placing an arm round her waist, took one of her hands in her own. Esther had never known her mother, who had died when she was but a baby. She had often been vaguely conscious of a void that only a mother's love can fill—and longing for someone to whom she could pour out the secrets of her heart, without fear, without reserve.

She was still numbed and dazed; still wondered whether she had dreamt it all—the convict gang, the uniformed officials, the hurried whispered words, that one impassioned kiss. The gentle touch of the woman at her side seemed to awaken her more fully. She glanced at the sweet face that was not without signs of a secret sorrow, and the light of womanly, motherly sympathy that shone from her eyes fell comfortingly on Esther's bruised heart. Then the flood-gates of her grief were opened. With a catching gasp, she burst into tears, and convulsively buried her face on the woman's bosom. Tears often bring relief; they brought relief to her.

The others, now that they were assured of her recovery, quietly melted away, only her father, standing by the mantelpiece, his head upon his hands, remained.

The woman, gently stroking Esther's hair, suffered her to weep awhile in silence. Then, bending down, kissed her forehead, and whispered a few simple words of encouragement and consolation—words, precious as jewels, and falling like dew from Heaven, they helped to soothe the burning heart. And as Esther listened, something told her that the woman who was speaking had also suffered.

The gathering roar of the approaching train sounded out. A porter thrust his head into the waiting-room, and, with a glance at John Mansfield, shouted out: "Your train, sir!"

"Esther, this is our train; but, if you like, if you don't feel well enough——"

"No, father, I—I want to get away, to get away!"

She was still weak, and her limbs were trembling. Assisted by the woman, she rose, and, taking her father's arm, passed out and entered the train. She could scarcely find words to thank the woman for her kindness; but the look from her eyes supplied the want of words.

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Gets the hair back,
Puts the hair right,
Keeps the hair right.

WHO SAY SO.

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"I have found 'Tatcho' of distinct benefit to my hair."—Trobridge, Crediton, June 13th, 1902.

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"My dear Mr. Sims,—'Tatcho' is wonderful, and all to whom I recommend it praise it. I hope others have advised the use of 'Tatcho' as I have."

LADY SYKES.

"Mayfair, W.

"I can recommend 'Tatcho.' It has really entirely renovated my hair."

"I USE ONLY 'TATCHO,'" says **Mrs. BROWN-POTTER.**

"LOOK AT MY HAIR NOW," said the eminent discoverer to the Editor of the *Daily Mail*. "Isn't that convincing evidence? In 'Tatcho' I have discovered a remedy capable of working wonders."

THE "TATCHO" TRIAL BOTTLE.

The introduction of the large 4/6 Trial Bottle at the nominal price of 1/10 (obtainable of all chemists, stores, and hairdressers, or direct, carriage paid from the "Tatcho" Depot, Lincoln's Inn, London), has been of enormous value to the public, and has proved a means of allowing users to verify for themselves the revelation "Tatcho" works on the hair.

"TATCHO" is a brilliant, spirituous tonic, the colour of whisky, free from all grease.
"TATCHO" is not a dye, and contains no colouring matter or any harmful ingredient.
"TATCHO" is sold by all chemists and stores throughout the world, in bottles at 1/-, 2/9, and /-, in addition to the special trial size referred to above.

"If," said John Mansfield, when he, in his turn, had endeavoured to express his thanks, "you should ever be in the neighbourhood of Warham, I hope you will come to see us."

The grey-haired lady took the card he handed her, and gave him one of her own from her case. Then the guard's flag was waved, and the carriage doors were slammed to. She pressed Esther's hands and kissed her.

It was only when the train had gathered motion that John Mansfield glanced at the card. It bore the words: "Mrs. Cecil Crofton, 35 Warwick Square, London, S.W."

No wonder if Esther had noticed signs of suffering endured on the sweet face. The woman who had been so good to her was Gentleman Jack's mother!

And if Esther's agony was great, hers had been and was greater. The days passed, but nothing had been heard of the escaped convict. Every day she dreaded to hear the news of his capture. She did not even know whether her son was alive. It may be imagined how the sight of the convicts at Roxeter station and the pathetic scene that ensued had affected one whose own son had worn the felon's dress and badge.

Fate works strangely, weaving a wonderful web in which the threads of many lives are interwoven, crossing and re-crossing one another.

A FAMILIAR FACE.

The journey from Roxeter Junction to Wrackam Dock—the station where convicts alight and are transferred from there to Wrackam Convict Prison—left but a blurred, confused recollection in Alec Scarsdale's mind. He scarcely heard the remarks that were passed among the convicts. The gentleman of the coining persuasion contrived to make one or two brutal jests on the subject of his "gal." The grey-haired old man and the little Cockney ventured upon a few whispered words of sympathy. But jest and sympathy fell upon unheeding ears.

The darkness that follows is more black than the darkness that precedes the flash of light. He had seen her; had heard her whisper "Till death!" had kissed her. Blackness before; a brief flash of light; blackness again, but more intense, more cruel!

His chin resting on his chest, every facial line and furrow deepened, his handcuffed hands clasped together and hanging down between his legs, he looked a picture of grim despair. He was in a state of mental collapse. Then, gradually the darkness seemed to be illumined by a faint glimmering of light. Youth was not yet crushed out of him; hope was not yet dead. Hope—the will-o'-the-wisp that beckons us from point to point; that, when we sink exhausted and fainting on the weary road, drags us on to our feet again, and plunges a spur into our sides; hope that whispers in the ear of the dying man a lying promise of life.

"Till death!" It was hope that whispered the words again and again in Scarsdale's ears, and seemed to point with outstretched hand to the distant light that now shone out like a guiding star—a woman's lasting love; a love that had held its own, impregnable against calumny, doubt, and time.

It was hope that raised up the drooping chin, and brought back a flash of the old fire to the grey eyes.

Darkness had set in when the train had reached Wrackham Dock, and those convicts who were new to the place gleaned but little knowledge of the surroundings. An omnibus was awaiting them, and the driver, a warder, exchanged greetings with the warders in charge of the party.

"I hope you've brought a nice, respectable little lot?" he cried.

"Oh, very," answered one of them, "especially Number 35; he started to spoon a girl on the platform at Roxeter, and then when we interfered, was going to bash my head with his bracelets. Yes, I think 35 is the pick of the basket, and I wish you joy over him. We were getting a little bit tired of him at our place."

The words were spoken loudly, and some of the convicts burst out laughing at the specimen of warder-humour.

Wrackam Convict Prison—a great barrack-like building, the work of convict labour—stood some distance away from the town of Wrackam, a large naval and military depot. The country around, though undulating, was low-lying, and here and there split up by the many little streams that flowed into the Reedway, the broad river on the edge of which stood Wrackam with its vast docks and basins.

On arrival at the prison, the convicts were conducted into the presence of the deputy-governor and a number of warders. The principal warder in charge handed over the official papers; and names and registered numbers were called over.

When Scarsdale's name and number had been called out, the deputy-governor paused, stared hard at him, and then, drawing aside the principal warder, conversed with him for some little time. The principal warder gave a full account of the episode at Roxeter Station. Scarsdale's reputation as being a dangerous character had already preceded him, and had prejudiced the prison officials against him. What the principal warder told the deputy-governor did not serve to lessen that prejudice.

When handcuffs and connecting chains had been removed, the convicts were conducted to their different cells. Special preparations had been made for Scarsdale's reception. He was placed in the strongest part of the prison. The convicts occupying the cells on either side of him were men whose sentences were nearing expiration, who, in consequence, would not be likely to endeavour to communicate with him by tappings on the wall, and other secret methods of communication known to prisoners.

Scarsdale was still under the ban of Special Orders, and the remainder of his sentence had yet to be completed.

It so happened that he had arrived on the night of the weekly search, and scarcely had the officials who had conducted him to his cell departed, than the door was flung open with a crash, and two warders entered. Without glancing at them, and, almost mechanically, Scarsdale unrolled the bedding for inspection, and then began to strip off his clothing. He was quite unconscious of the fact that one of the warders had fixed his eyes upon him, and was staring at him as if trying to recall something. An exclamation, bursting from the man's lips, made him look up.

The warder's face was familiar to him; but for a moment—only a brief moment—he could not recall when and where he had seen him. Then, like a flash of light, it dawned upon him; and his mind went back to Warham police-station, and the night—that terrible night—of his arrest. It was the warder he had struck.

(A further long instalment of this story appears in next Tuesday's SHORT STORIES.)

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By MADGE MORRIS.

[I shall be glad to answer, to the best of my ability, any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to me personally, c/o the Editor of Short Stories.*]*

Is it Love?

How is one to know when a boy is in love? "Mater" propounds this question. Her young son, a youth of nineteen, has of late become very strange in his manner. He seems abstracted, and is very reserved. He goes out constantly, and keeps very late hours. Do I read these as symptoms of heart affection?

Ask him straight out, "Mater," and judge from his manner what is the nature of his abstractedness. If he is *not* in love, he will tell you so in terms probably of contempt. If he gives an evasive or suspicious answer, I think you may assume there is something in the love theory. How does he dress when he goes out at night? Does he brush his hair very carefully, and look particularly neat, and have you noticed a distinct improvement lately in his manner and general deportment? If so, then be assured someone has stolen his affections.

Mother v. Daughter.

"Fifty Three" is a widower, and perplexed as to the rival claims on his affections of two ladies, a mother and her daughter. While he admires immensely the daughter, the mother (a widow) has great mature charm and would, he should think, make an admirable wife. He is anxious to marry again. Which do I think would make him the better wife, the mother or the daughter?

I think the mother would. It is too much of "Fifty Three" to expect that his admiration for the girl is likely to be returned, save in very exceptional circumstances. If he married her he must do so under a sense of entering into a one-sided attachment. The mother, on the other hand, for whom he appears to have an admiration, might be the very woman to make him comfortable and to administer to his home needs. If he is mentally able to make a selection on judicial grounds, the chances are distinctly in favour of the mother.

The Unknown Suitor.

"Perplexed" is very much worried over a certain man who continuously writes asking her to meet him. He app ars to be very fond of her. She does not know much about him, but she has an idea that he is quite a desirable acquaintance; but at the same time has not the courage to accept his invitations. How should she act? He may really be quite a nice man, and, on the other hand, might be an adventurer.

Next time "Perplexed" hears from this man, let her make a note of his whereabouts, and call in the services of her brother or some male friend she can trust. Let this gentleman be present at the appointed time and place instead of her, and explain his identity, adding that he would be very pleased to do anything on "Perplexed's" behalf. The man might on the one hand be very much abashed, apologise and disappear, in which case he is clearly an undesirable, or, on the other, he might candidly explain his reason for writing to her, adding details about himself and his position. If these details were satisfactory, and the man seemed a "desirable," "Perplexed's" friend might think it worth while to accept an acquaintanceship, and in course of time introduce him.

Probably a Flirt.

"Jim" is engaged to be married to a young lady who says she loves him but not with all her heart. She says that her love is growing, but while she does not at present love "Jim" passionately, she thinks it will come after marriage. Meanwhile she is very fond of other men's society, though very jealous of "Jim."

Well, "Jim," I don't quite like the story you tell me. Her liking for other men's society rather suggests that she is the familiar type of flirt, anxious to keep a bird in hand while she inspects the possibilities of those in the bush. Her jealousy of you may, as you suggest in your letter, be merely to "keep you round her." While I cannot attempt to influence your decision if you really love her yourself, I should not advise a too close engagement unless she gives you proof that she really *does* love you, at any rate with as much heart as she has in her.

The Familiar Question.

Few problems recur more frequently than that of the girl who is attached to the impecunious young man. "Nita" is my client this week for advice in similar circumstances. Her sweetheart is a clerk earning thirty shillings a week in a City office as a typist. Of course "Nita's" parents have the usual objection to any engagement, and "Nita" is, as usual, in despair to know what to do.

Well, "Nita," let me tell you what I have told many others. Let matters stand over for a time, without becoming definitely engaged. If time proves that you are really devoted to each other, and that nothing can possibly sever you, your parents must see that to stand in your way would be foolish. Time would also enable you to judge as to your sweetheart's chances of promotion. Few young men of ordinary ability, and experienced in office work, need remain more than a year or so on such a salary as thirty shillings a week, and if your friend is energetic and capable he must make more within a year or two, when you could safely become engaged. However, you should wait for the present and see what time brings forth.

A Doubtful Lover.

"Mitcham" writes "Twenty-Five" has given her heart to a man of twenty-eight, who has gone abroad for five years. He apparently does not reciprocate her love. In the meantime another man has appeared who pays marked attention to her. If the absent man did not reciprocate your love at twenty-five, he is scarcely likely to do so at thirty. And who knows but that during his stay in India he may not meet someone else whom he does love? I think the girl would be unwise to continue this forlorn hope, and, if she cares for the second suitor, I think she should at least consider him as a lover, leaving the rest to time.

An Offer of Marriage.

Jessie B. writes to tell me that she has just received an offer of marriage from a gentleman whom she likes but does not really love. He is particularly well endowed with this world's goods, and she thinks she could learn to love him in time. Should she accept so good an offer?

I do not think Jessie B. should at once consent to an engagement which might end disastrously in the near future. No, she should tell him exactly the state of her feelings towards him, and if he really loves her he will be quite willing to wait till he has reason to believe the time has arrived for him to renew his offer.

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